TRANSFERABLE INSIGHTS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE SURVEYS THAT ADDRESS UNIVERSAL PAIN POINTS

ABOUT THESE GUIDES

Getting to hear directly from students about their experiences in school is an essential factor in establishing the kinds of learning environments that ultimately lead to improved academic performance, foster positive identity development, and support overall well-being. Student experience surveys, like UChicago's Cultivate or PERTS' Elevate, measure the learning conditions tied to these crucial outcomes.

And there are certain transferable insights that research and lived experiences have shown are necessary when implementing student experience surveys if schools want to truly take advantage of the learning opportunity the surveys provide. These transferable insights range from technical implementation strategies to crucial mindsets for educators engaging in this work. As a result, they can be tricky to put in place – even when the intention to do so exists. These guides include recommended practices, along with solutions to the challenges leaders or teachers encounter when choosing to center student experience in their schools.

These guides lay out these transferable insights using three implementation milestones:

1. Successful Administration - these transferable insights should be in place as the student experience survey is being rolled out for the first time – either before or during administration
2. Constructive Engagement - these transferable insights should occur in conjunction with the delivery of survey results – both as educators prepare to dig into the data and as they engage in their initial analysis
3. Responsive Action - these transferable insights should be in place as educators make plans for action in response to their results.

SUCCESSFUL ADMINISTRATION

Much of a survey's success is determined before the survey is even administered. Importantly, a thoughtful intentional roll out of the survey over time optimizes the benefits and minimizes the potential of doing harm to students. In order to have the greatest impact on students' daily experience of learning, several technical and logistical hurdles must be handled prior to survey administration, including clearly communicating the intent of the survey to all stakeholders, wrapping the survey into pre-existing strategic plans or initiatives, and ensuring students are brought into the intent and subsequent use of the survey.

These snapshots focus on four transferable insights that are necessary for the successful implementation of a student experience survey[1] in a school or district:

- Prepare and deliver transparent communication
- Ensure alignment with other work and initiatives
- Be clear with students upfront about the purpose of the survey
- Protect teacher time

[1] UChicago's Cultivate and PERTS' Elevate are examples of student experience surveys. These surveys measure learning conditions that are impactful for students' academic outcomes, well-being, and identity development. More information about Cultivate can be found here. More information about Elevate can be found here.

Prepare and deliver transparent communication

I am unsure about what this survey is for or how we will use it?

BACKGROUND

Even if leaders themselves understand the purpose and uses for student experience survey data it is still necessary for them to consistently communicate the significance and value of student-centered data initiatives in meetings, training, or other staff gatherings. This way there is an explicit message that the work of improving learning experiences and environments is a priority for everyone in the school – from teachers in their classroom to leadership in the building. Frequent communication from leadership should also message the importance of student experience data, which is often less valued than academic data. In addition, an emphasis from those in leadership positions on data use as a non-threatening and positive tool for improvement can also help prevent teachers from feeling disenfranchised or devalued. Furthermore, when the purpose of data use is to support teachers to be the best they can be and this is communicated clearly, teachers will be more invested and bought into the use of the survey data.

"I always kept the lines of communication open with [survey administrators] in case they needed anything."

- Jessica Coulson, SEL & College & Career Readiness Coordinator, San Ramon School District

IN PRACTICE

- Prepare material that contains consistent messaging about the purpose and intent of student experience survey projects. Be sure to not only reiterate what the survey is, but also explain the why behind it and how it aligns with other work and initiatives (see Transferable Insight | Ensure alignment with other work and initiatives).

- Share the message in multiple contexts: staff meetings, professional learning, team meetings, one-on-ones, onboarding.

- Build a communication pattern that regularly asks stakeholders to share their understanding of the project.

- Use 'we' and 'us' language to communicate the shared nature of the work in order to help teachers understand the feedback they will receive shouldn't be taken "personally" but instead that it represents an opportunity for collective reflection and improvement.

Ensure alignment with other work and initiatives

WHAT LEADERS MIGHT BE HEARING FROM TEACHERS

How is this survey related to my practice? It feels like it's just more work.

BACKGROUND

New initiatives and programs in education settings often lack coherence and seem disconnected from one another and from existing programs. Therefore, it is critical that a student experience survey be used as more than a one-off, disconnected assessment. Instead, it must be utilized along with existing initiatives as a tool to elevate and improve student experience. Student achievement is more likely to be advanced when there is coherence among improvement frameworks than when there are unrelated efforts and initiatives. Thus, student experience survey work needs to be aligned to the instructional practice and focus of the school as well as with other initiatives. A conceptual alignment also enables teachers to understand how other school initiatives benefit from improving conditions that are measured by a student experience survey.

It is also important to note that the learning conditions often measured on student experience surveys are the essence of good teaching – including things like whether students feel their teacher: cares about them; knows their strengths and weaknesses in a subject area; or makes them feel welcome in their classroom. Teachers are already working on these practices everyday in their classrooms - surveys and complementary frameworks and activities enable them to focus their efforts.

"There were some existing structures in place that the district had already - aligned with what the [survey] aims at creating"

- Jessica Coulson, SEL & College & Career Readiness Coordinator, San Ramon School District

IN PRACTICE

- Identify teachers who have worked on learning conditions in their classrooms and have them champion the benefit of student experience data collection and the connection to their work. Have them spread the value to their colleagues.
- Draw throughlines among school priorities, ongoing activities, and initiatives, thus preventing any disconnect from other district and school transformation efforts.
- Streamline and centralize support between diverse entities (e.g., districts to schools) or organizational bodies (e.g., counselors to teachers or language arts to the math department).
- Maintain the visibility of these data and the improvement efforts teachers are undertaking in response to their analysis.
- Create spaces for collective learning where teachers come together to share ideas and experiences, ask questions, and brainstorm next steps with one another.
- Communicate distinct and direct links to larger district and school initiatives.
- Make sure to regularly remind teachers that student experience data do not represent new work, but instead provide additional information to inform the work teachers are already doing. Once a smaller group of educators understands and sees the value in the engagement of students in this way, additional teachers can be brought in to learn the process and spread the benefits to their colleagues.

Be clear with students upfront about the purpose of the survey

WHAT LEADERS MIGHT BE HEARING FROM TEACHERS

Students don't want to take another survey. Survey fatigue is real.

WHAT TEACHERS MIGHT BE HEARING FROM STUDENTS

Why do I have to take *another* survey.

BACKGROUND

In a single school year students are asked and often required to take many many surveys. Before any student data are gathered, it is imperative that there is a shared understanding between leaders and staff that the purpose of student experience surveys is to center students' voices and subsequently share power with them in order to improve their experiences. All stakeholders must be aware that it is harmful to students to gather their perspectives on their experience when there is no intention or means to implement change, or when it does not lead to a relevant or timely response. Students should understand why they are providing data and what will be done with their responses, and then be included in the decision-making process about how the survey and their data is used and student buy-in is critical because when students do not understand the context for why they are taking a survey they are much less likely to care about it.

"The one thing that this did prove to me, if they are invested in it they'll do it. I knew that but I never had the data to actually prove that, but now I do."

- Ashley Kannan, Middle School Social Studies Teacher, Oak Park School District

IN PRACTICE

- Ensure students know that:
  - The survey is administered to help teachers improve their experiences in class.
  - Their answers are anonymous, so they can feel comfortable saying what they think.
  - Their teacher won't get in trouble if they say something negative.
  - The more honest and thoughtful they are, the more things in the class can improve.
- Utilize existing structures like advisory periods to share the purpose and intent of the survey with students.
- Empower student council or student voice committee members to be ambassadors to other students on survey related questions and participation.
- Provide opportunities for students to share their feedback on survey implementation.

Protect teacher time

I don't have time to deal with this. It's too much.

BACKGROUND

Successfully administering a student experience survey and incorporating these data into a school or teacher's decision making requires planning in advance for the allocation of needed resources such as physical space and time. Time in particular is critical for data recipients to reflect and process all the information in a meaningful and productive way. Teachers often feel challenged by a lack of time for data analysis and that they face a trade-off between data-driven inquiry work and their teaching.

This is especially important because receiving student experience feedback can be incredibly challenging and even upsetting for teachers. Teachers report a desire for community with their peers who are experiencing something similar. This reminds them that they were not alone in their attempts to grapple with these data. Opportunities to share, ask questions, and brainstorm with colleagues can be indispensable to teachers' ability to fully engage with student experience data.

What I think has been the most challenging but most important part of the work is that you're setting aside the sacred time … that this requires"

- Jessica Bunzol, UChicago Network for College Success Coach

IN PRACTICE

- Build data collection, reflection, and planning into existing processes, like recurring grade level or subject area meetings, or PLC meetings.
- Utilize norms and protocols that include time for community building as well data literacy to optimize the use of the protected time.

Successful Administration References

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CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

When teachers have access to student experience data and are given the opportunity to regularly review student feedback, they are then able to make decisions about their practice that are informed by students' actual wants and needs. To fully realize the unique learning opportunity that student experience data can provide for educators, it is necessary to articulate norms and mindsets that prepare teachers to hear student feedback, legitimize student expertise, and foster an environment in which teachers feel safe in engaging with the data—not as a punitive evaluation, but as a tool for improvement. Without proper measures in place to encourage constructive engagement with student experience data, this unique opportunity for collaboration and dialogue with students will go unrealized.

These snapshots focus on three transferable insights that facilitate constructive engagement with a student experience survey[1] in a school or district:

- Address existing beliefs around student feedback
- Communicate that data are for improvement rather than evaluation
- Recognize the difference between impact and intent

[1] UChicago's Cultivate and PERTS' Elevate are examples of student experience surveys. These surveys measure learning conditions that are impactful for students' academic outcomes, well-being, and identity development. More information about Cultivate can be found here. More information about Elevate can be found here.

Address existing beliefs around student feedback

WHAT LEADERS MIGHT BE HEARING FROM TEACHERS

> There are reasons I do things a certain way, and students just don't understand.

> My students didn't understand these questions.

BACKGROUND

Fostering positive teacher mindsets around student feedback is essential to fulfilling engagement with student experience data, for both adults and students. It can, understandably, be very challenging for teachers to receive feedback from their students, especially when it might be negative. However, it is imperative that teachers not respond to student feedback with defensiveness, nor seek to deflect the feedback as students misconstruing or not understanding the questions. It is especially important to discourage the interpretation that less than positive feedback originates in a deficiency in the student (e.g., bad mood, poor attitude, etc.). Cultivate is built upon research that recognizes that a student's experience of a learning environment is often a function of learning conditions created by teachers rather than a reflection on the individual student. Reaffirming this ensures that educators approach student feedback with an open mind, which is essential for the effective use of student experience data as a tool for improvement. For this reason, adultist beliefs regarding the legitimacy of student expertise should be challenged. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to shift their mindsets away from taking negative student feedback as a personal indictment and towards viewing student feedback as a unique opportunity to co-create ideal learning environments with their students.

"Be open-minded and prepared to do some self-reflection as well. You have to be humble."

- BELE Network High School Teacher

IN PRACTICE

- Present research on the reliability of student surveys and the connection between students' reports of their classroom experiences and their academic performance.
- Educate teachers about adultism and how it manifests when students share about their experiences.
- Share success stories that:
  - Describe times when teachers have acted on feedback from students and experienced a positive in their classroom environments or relationships with students.
  - Demonstrate the potential for positive growth when teachers value student perceptions and believe they are true.
- Create norms or use protocols that:
  - Help individuals reflect on and interrogate their own sense making (e.g., highlight certain buzz words that indicate a closed mindset).
  - Direct individuals to reflect on their own biases and check themselves and others when engaging with student feedback.

Communicate that data are for improvement rather than evaluation

WHAT LEADERS MIGHT BE HEARING FROM TEACHERS

So this is just another way to judge us?

We're already being evaluated by you. Now our students are evaluating us too?

BACKGROUND

Often, negative mindsets around student feedback come from a place of distrust. Teachers believe the data will be used punitively. This is a reflection of our current era of high-stakes accountability, in which educators often suspect that data will be used against them. Research indicates that rather than viewing data as a vehicle for school improvement, teachers regularly see data as penalizing and punitive . Counteracting this view and instilling trust in data involves building a school culture that is supportive of data use and that makes data use transparent, open, and inclusive, enabling the educators to have confidence in the value of data use for improving student achievement. Because of these pervasive misgivings around data collection and use in schools, it is essential that norms and structures be communicated and put in place to help teachers approach student experience data with an open mind and a willingness to engage.

The survey responses will be used only to inform continuous learning. Survey responses will not be distributed outside of the district, and they will be reflected upon using a structured protocol during professional development engagements.

- PERTS suggested Superintendent letter

IN PRACTICE

- Explicitly communicate that survey results will not be used in an evaluative manner by leadership so teachers can feel assured that the data will not be used in a punitive way against them.
- Co-create clear norms around using data for improvement rather than evaluation.
- Create learning-centered communities of practice that can activate support from trusted colleagues and administrators for ongoing sense making and action planning.
- Create safe spaces (outside of an accountability regimen) to use student experience data to normalize and encourage experimentation and reflection and deepen learning.
- Celebrate successes while also acknowledging growth opportunities.

Recognize the difference between impact and intent

I'm already working so hard on these conditions – how can they say 'not at all true?'

BACKGROUND

One of the many ways that student experience data can be a learning opportunity for educators is by flagging where certain plans or measures did not have the impact they intended. It may be discouraging to think that a lesson plan or project that a teacher has spent hours working on did not land for their students. They may have *intended* for the lesson to be unique or draw upon students' lives in an interesting way or even just offer a fun break, but that might not be the *impact* students felt. Because the student experience surveys measure this "impact" by asking students directly how they interpret the experiences they have in their classroom, teachers are able to hear clearly from their students as to whether something worked or not.

Student experience data is not an indictment of who teachers are as people or their character, but instead they represent in-the-moment feedback about specific choices teachers are making – choices that, by definition, they can choose to continue making or adjust depending on what they learn. This doesn't mean they aren't "really good at relating to kids," as one question asks, or that they aren't trying to do so. It just means that, according to some students, whatever they are choosing to do isn't quite translating. For teachers who are able to acknowledge this crucial fact, student experience data quickly becomes their most valued form of feedback. They appreciate input from colleagues, coaches, and leadership, but they recognize they aren't "teaching a class of 30 instructional coaches," they are teaching students, so their opinion of that "impact" should hold the most weight as they work to improve their experiences.

We think we're doing all of these things as an educator in terms of our practice. But what's being received and what's being noticed and what's being lifted by students is really different.

- Rachelle Stone, Restorative Justice Educator, Madison, Wisconsin

IN PRACTICE

- Remind teachers:
  - That these data are not evaluations of their character, but represent feedback about how students perceive the choices they are making in their classroom.
  - To expect variation because no two students will have the same experience in their class and it is crucial to understand the range of students' perceptions.
  - That what is most important about a lesson or activity is how students make meaning of the experience, because ultimately that determines their engagement and learning.
- Activate teachers' schema around impact v. intent by having them reflect on different experiences they have had, for example: when a shared experience landed differently for them versus others; when they thought a lesson would go one way but instead went differently, when their interpretation of someone else's actions didn't match what they ultimately came to believe about that person, etc.

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RESPONSIVE ACTION

Acting on student experience surveys is an opportunity to both identify and address patterns in how students experience their classrooms and schools, but it's also a chance to foster and deepen the partnership between adults and students through looking at the survey data together. Strengthening relationships through a focus on student experiences operates as a kind of virtuous circle: strong partnerships between adults and young people are both a resource for and an outcome of ongoing, student-centered dialog that focuses intentionally on taking action to improve student experience and ultimately outcomes in the classroom.

These snapshots focus on two transferable insights that support efforts to develop and sustain responsive action to student experience surveys[1] in a school or district:
- Include students in choosing how to respond to survey data
- Start small and stick with it

[1] UChicago's Cultivate and PERTS' Elevate are examples of student experience surveys. These surveys measure learning conditions that are impactful for students' academic outcomes, well-being, and identity development. More information about Cultivate can be found here. More information about Elevate can be found here.

Include students in choosing how to respond to survey data

WHAT LEADERS MIGHT BE HEARING FROM TEACHERS

So how should I work on improving these conditions? What changes should I make?

WHAT TEACHERS MIGHT BE HEARING FROM STUDENTS

What are you going to do with this survey anyway?

BACKGROUND

Students often believe that their views are ignored in school and many report feeling powerless in their school experiences. Research suggests, though, that efforts to elevate student voice can increase students' sense of agency, engagement, and ownership, as well as lead to improvements in academic performance in the classroom. Engaging students directly in reviewing, interpreting, and choosing how to act on their own survey results elevates their experiences and perspectives. Deepening engagement in this way allows students to meaningfully partner with teachers to transform *their* experience. It ultimately positions students as agents of change, rather than passive respondents.

Beyond the more immediate work of data analysis and action planning, thinking carefully about how to build students' capacity for sharing collective learning with others is important for building on success. Doing so fosters and sustains the partnership between teachers and students, and can ultimately transform student experience on a larger scale.

You can actually learn things from a young person as long as you're willing to listen.

- Student, Learning First Alliance Student Voices Podcast Series, 2023

IN PRACTICE

- Share survey results directly with students and identify patterns, set priorities, and generate ideas.

- Be curious and trust your students – be open to engaging with and iterating with students on their experiences, perspectives, and ideas (even when they might initially seem outlandish or difficult to act on) to identify opportunities for action.

- Go slowly and focus on deliberately building students' muscle for giving and discussing feedback with teachers – for many, if not most students, this is an unfamiliar, even uncomfortable request.

- Include students on teams with educators and school leaders where they can share their experiences with, and perspectives on successful strategies that changed learning conditions in their classrooms.

- Look for opportunities to share and celebrate students' leadership in making change beyond the classroom.

Start small and stick with it

W H A T   L E A D E R S   M I G H T   B E   H E A R I N G   F R O M   T E A C H E R S

This change idea is not working.

W H A T   T E A C H E R S   M I G H T   B E   H E A R I N G   F R O M   S T U D E N T S

Why are we doing this differently now?

B A C K G R O U N D

Giving up on change ideas too quickly can lead educators and students together to abandon promising efforts prematurely. Starting small, building on your successes, and planning to stick with changes long enough to see and understand the results are all key parts of developing effective change efforts in partnership with your students. Seeing the impact of changes can take time and it can feel difficult to stick with them long enough to see meaningful results. Evidence from continuous improvement efforts supports the idea that starting small can help educators make and sustain successful changes over time.

Kids can feel it when teachers are feeling burnt out and at the end of their rope and overwhelmed. And so when I was able to focus on small wins and just really targeted areas, I think that helped my mindset.

- Maryrose Hembd, Teacher, BELE Impact story

I N   P R A C T I C E

- Choose manageable, minimally intrusive, and low-cost (time, energy, resources) change ideas that will help get the ball rolling while also respecting the limited bandwidth of everyone involved.

- Be curious and develop a broad base of evidence to help understand whether or not change ideas are successful – including informal observations, additional quantitative data, check-in conversations with students, and even observable changes in students' behaviors and interactions with their peers and/or teachers.

- Be willing to stick with change ideas beyond initial implementation regardless of whether or not there are any immediate improvements.

- Be transparent with students about which change ideas are being implemented and why.

- Expand promising efforts slowly and take time to celebrate successes with students in order to help to create a sense of continuity and momentum, as well as to deepen relationships and students' sense of belonging.

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