

# Student Surveys

## Measuring Students' Perceptions of Teacher Effectiveness

2 of 6 in the series

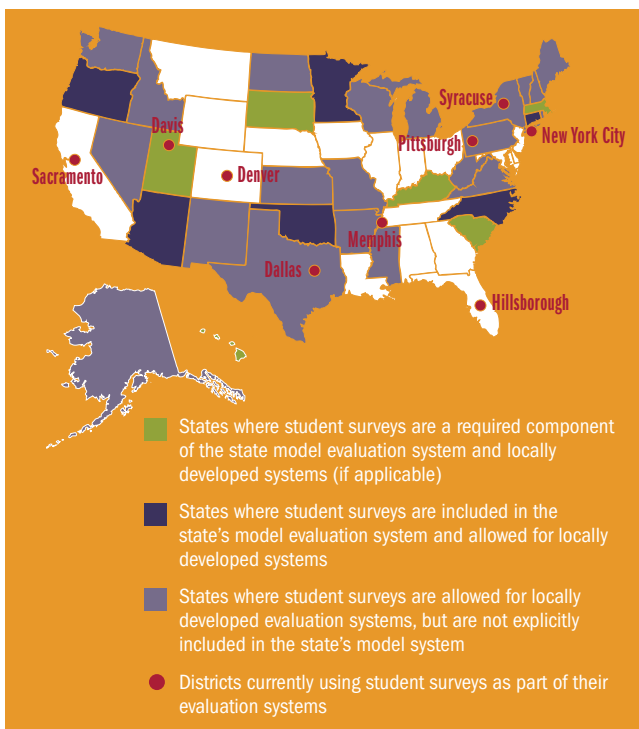
When releasing the first of several Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) research reports on student surveys in December 2010, Harvard University researcher Ron Ferguson told a press conference of reporters: “The headline is three words: ‘The students know.’” A growing number of states and districts are now acting on that finding.

Traditionally, a school administrator visits a classroom once a year, observes the teacher for a portion of the day, and then assesses his or her performance and provides feedback on how to improve. But this situation is far from perfect: observing such a small slice of a teacher’s instructional time does not yield a full, accurate

picture of a teacher’s performance that can inform actionable feedback for improvement. However, those who spend the most time experiencing a teacher’s practice—students—can contribute to this evaluation and improvement process. By drawing from students’ meaningful interactions and connections with their teachers, **student surveys** can act as one of multiple measures of teacher effectiveness in a high-quality evaluation and support system while providing valuable and actionable feedback to teachers that will help to improve their students’ experiences in the classroom.

Despite an emerging body of evidence on the value of student surveys, they have faced resistance from teachers and unions, as well as from states and districts, which have questioned the accuracy and balked at the costs of developing and administering surveys.

But student surveys deserve a closer look. Several states and districts are implementing student surveys with the support of teachers and principals and without draining scarce resources. Other school systems are piloting or field testing surveys for developmental purposes only, opting to build teachers’ support for surveys over time. This brief offers strategies on how to make the case for using student surveys, marshal teacher support and overcome obstacles to implementation.



### RECOMMENDATIONS

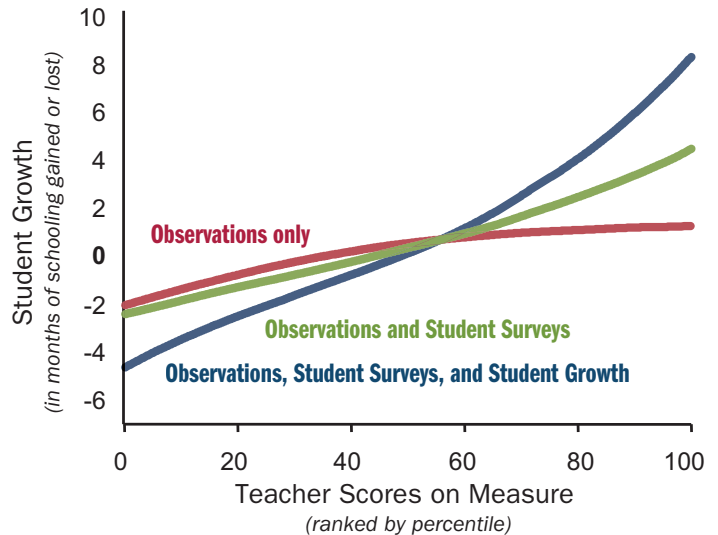
#### Make the case for student surveys.

Teachers have many legitimate concerns about student surveys (see Myths v. Facts sidebar on page 2), so be prepared to listen, acknowledge their concerns and then make a clear and compelling case for using student surveys. When making your case, emphasize the following points:

- ➔ **Student surveys provide teachers with actionable feedback.** Student surveys provide principals and evaluators with critical insights about a teacher’s professional practices. Students spend more time with teachers than a principal or observer, so they understand the norms of the classroom and are well positioned to describe their teachers’ practices and provide them with actionable feedback. Moreover, student surveys provide *immediate* feedback to teachers, unlike student growth measures, which often do not provide teachers with insights until the following school year.

## COMBINING MEASURES PREDICTS STUDENT GROWTH

This graph shows the relationship between student outcomes (as measured by value-added estimates) and a teacher's overall effectiveness. As more measures of effectiveness are used to determine a teacher's overall effectiveness, the line becomes steeper, indicating a stronger relationship—or correlation—between the teacher's effectiveness rating and his or her impact on student growth. In other words, when more high-quality measures are used to evaluate teachers, evaluation results more accurately reflect student learning.



Source: *The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2012). Gathering Feedback for Effective Teaching. Available at [bit.ly/1oG2zAK](http://bit.ly/1oG2zAK).*

- ➔ **Student surveys help district and school leaders design professional development.** Effective student surveys provide school and district leaders with additional data to inform professional development and improve instruction.<sup>1</sup> School and district leaders can use student feedback to plan and design systemic, schoolwide and targeted professional development for teachers. Watch this [video](#) to see a principal and teacher in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) discuss the teacher's student survey results.
- ➔ **Research shows that student surveys are reliable and valid measures of teacher effectiveness.** Students recognize effective teaching when they experience it. Researchers have found that student survey results are predictive of student achievement gains. In other words, students who learn the most during a school year also tend to rate their teachers highly on surveys.<sup>2</sup> In response to this research, 19 districts in Tennessee are implementing student surveys to evaluate teachers in the 2013–14 school year.<sup>3</sup>
- ➔ **Student surveys improve the accuracy of evaluation systems.** Many skeptics question whether student surveys are an accurate evaluation tool, since students lack formal instructional training. However, researchers have found that evaluation systems that combine data from observations, student growth and student surveys provide the most complete and accurate picture of teacher performance.<sup>4</sup> Of these, student surveys tend to be the most reliable measure, in part because they average the views of many students who are with the teacher every day of the school year.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, student surveys predict student growth over time, an effect that is amplified when survey data is combined with observation and value-added data, as shown in the chart above.

### MYTHS VS. FACTS

**MYTH:** Teachers will receive negative feedback from students who don't like them for reasons that have nothing to do with their effectiveness.

**FACT:** States and districts using student surveys are not finding evidence of unfairly negative feedback. Robust screening of student responses helps ensure fairness.

**MYTH:** Students don't have the expertise or knowledge to assess teacher effectiveness.

**FACT:** Thoughtful student surveys do not ask students to make judgments about the effectiveness of their teachers. Instead, these surveys ask students to respond to questions about the quality of the instructional environment and whether it supports their learning. On this topic, students are the experts and their thoughts should guide teachers' improvement efforts.

**MYTH:** Students won't be honest when completing surveys if their teacher is in the room.

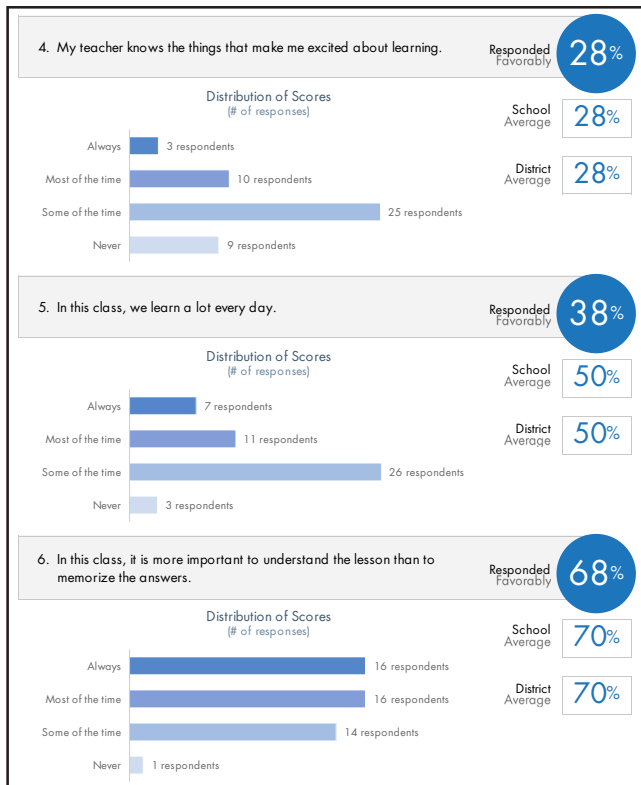
**FACT:** In most states and districts, teachers do not administer surveys to their own students.



## Build teacher support.

In many states and districts, teachers question the reliability of student surveys and whether student feedback should impact teachers' evaluations. To build teacher support for student surveys, leading states and districts are adopting these strategies:

- **Engage teachers and unions in the design and implementation of student surveys.** The Colorado Legacy Foundation collected input from more than 1,400 teachers when developing the *Colorado Student Perception Survey*. As a result, teachers in districts that adopted the survey were already familiar with its content and purpose. Baltimore City Schools is currently field-testing a student survey that aligns closely with their instructional framework, an observation tool that was developed with input from many educators throughout the district.<sup>6</sup>



Source: Colorado Legacy Foundation. (2013, Spring), *Colorado Student Perception Survey, grades 6–12*.

- **Share survey feedback with teachers.** Develop a report, like the one displayed on the left, that summarizes a teacher's survey results and his or her strengths and areas for improvement. Some teachers' resistance to surveys melts away once they get feedback and see how the results can help them grow professionally.
- **Field test surveys as a tool for support and development before using them to evaluate teachers.** States and districts such as Colorado and Houston Independent School District introduced student surveys during a no-stakes field test or pilot. This strategy gave teachers time to become familiar with the survey and prepare their students. In Colorado, surveys were rolled out over a period of three years, beginning with a no-stakes pilot in 16 partner districts. Teachers were allowed to opt in to the pilot, and survey feedback was shared only with them—not school administrators. The pilot helped to build teachers' trust in the survey instrument as a tool for their development, rather than as a high-stakes addition to their evaluation.<sup>7</sup>
- **Establish "safeguards" to ensure survey data is accurate, and share these screening protocols with teachers.** For example, if a student simply fills in the same answer for all questions, then that survey should be removed, which ensures that teachers receive accurate and reliable feedback.

## Avoid unintended consequences.

Student surveys have the potential to improve instructional practices by providing teachers with feedback on the areas where they need to improve. But student surveys may alter teacher behavior in other, unintended ways. For example, teachers may be more lenient with students if they anticipate it will improve the results of their students' surveys. To guard against these unintended consequences:

- **Don't rely too heavily on student surveys—or any single measure of teacher performance.** Instead, use multiple reliable measures. In Denver Public Schools, for example, student surveys only count for 10 percent of a teacher's total evaluation rating.<sup>9</sup>
- **Monitor and analyze student survey data.** In particular, look for evidence that survey data are positively correlated with gains in student achievement. Use these data to improve the survey instrument by eliminating survey items that are not correlated with student achievement or the observation tool.



## Survey the right students.

States and districts should think carefully about selecting the students who will be surveyed. Consider the following scenarios when deciding which students are surveyed:

- ⇒ Middle- and high-school students may experience survey fatigue if they are required to complete surveys for multiple teachers. Establish a survey protocol or random sampling method to ensure that students with multiple teachers do not complete more than two or three surveys.
- ⇒ Research is mixed on the reliability of surveys for students in prekindergarten through second grade. When deciding whether to administer surveys to students in early grades, consider the availability and credibility of a developmentally appropriate survey. In Denver Public Schools, district administrators decided not to survey students in grades PK–2 following a year-long pilot.

## Commit the resources for survey administration.

States and districts face tight budgets, and administering surveys to all students consumes scarce resources. But compared to other measures of effectiveness, such as classroom observations and student learning objectives, surveys are relatively inexpensive. PPS, for example, has spent approximately \$20.10 per pupil to administer student surveys as part of its new evaluation system, compared to \$119.00 per pupil on classroom observations and \$112.20 per pupil on value-added estimates.<sup>8</sup> To administer student surveys without breaking the bank:

- ⇒ Designate school-based staff to coordinate the logistics of survey administration at the building—rather than district—level.
- ⇒ Capitalize on existing resources used to administer other districtwide surveys—for example, surveys to parents, teachers and students on school climate.
- ⇒ Administer online surveys in schools that have the technological resources.
- ⇒ Use a pre-validated survey instrument such as the [Batelle for Kids Student Experience Survey](#), [My Student Survey](#), [Panorama](#), [Tripod Student Perception Survey](#), and [Youth Truth](#).

### A NOTE ABOUT SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION

States and districts have options when implementing student surveys: They can select a prevalidated survey from a vendor, or they can develop their own survey. A decision about which route to take should be based on:

- Whether the state or district has the capacity and expertise to create developmentally appropriate student surveys;
- Whether there are funds available to use a vendor's survey; and
- Whether there is capacity to administer student surveys and analyze the results.

Without a thoughtful implementation plan, a well-designed student survey will not be a reliable and valid measure of teacher performance. The MET Project has published the report [Asking Students about Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation](#) to guide states and districts through this process of administering student surveys.

## CONCLUSION

State and district leaders can make a compelling case for including student surveys in a new teacher evaluation and support system. Student surveys present real challenges for states and districts, but these obstacles can be overcome, with significant payoffs in teacher development and evaluation rating accuracy. States and districts around the country are finding that student surveys create a feedback loop that strengthens evaluation systems—students' insights improve teachers' practice, which benefits learning in the long run.

- 1 Colorado Legacy Foundation. (2013), "Teacher Reflections on Student Perception Surveys Results." Available at <http://bit.ly/10WkFtn>.
- 2 The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2012, September), "Asking Students about Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation." Available at <http://bit.ly/PkGSvR>.
- 3 Tennessee Department of Education. (2013), "TEAM: Student Perception Surveys." Available at <http://bit.ly/1oG2FZ5>.
- 4 The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2012), "Gathering Feedback for Effective Teaching." Available at <http://bit.ly/1oG2zAK>.
- 5 The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2012, September), "Asking Students about Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation." Available at <http://bit.ly/PkGSvR>.
- 6 Baltimore City Schools. (2013), "Student Surveys." Available at <http://bit.ly/1GMA405>.
- 7 Colorado Legacy Foundation. (2013, August), "Student Perception Survey Planning Guide." Available at <http://bit.ly/1tDW2It>.
- 8 Chambers, J., et al. (2013, May), "How Much are Districts Spending to Implement Teacher Evaluation Systems?" American Institutes for Research. Available at <http://bit.ly/1dxUlpC>.
- 9 Denver Public Schools. "Student Perception Survey 2013–14." Available at <http://bit.ly/1ise4Kh>.

