

Survey Says

Using Teacher Feedback to Bolster Evaluation



BY ROSS WIENER AND KASIA LUNDY

For teacher evaluation to be “done right”—to lead to actual improvement in teacher effectiveness and therefore in student learning—school districts must pay careful attention to designing and implementing evaluation systems. It is understandable that early efforts to make teacher evaluation more rigorous and meaningful to teachers have been focused on the nuts and bolts of getting evaluations up and running: creating new rubrics, specifying the number of observations conducted, establishing the format of observations, deciding on the length of time between observations and feedback, and providing training for those who conduct observations.

As the more adaptive work of using evaluations to improve performance comes to the fore, it is important to make teacher

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voice integral in shaping both the evaluation process and the type of supports that accompany evaluations. Neglecting to include the views of educators in the continuous refinement of evaluations risks imposing a compliance regime that fails to help anyone become a better teacher.

This commonsense notion of soliciting “employee voice” for the purpose of improving fundamental organizational practices has been widely adopted by some of the most successful businesses in the world. Schools are not corporations, of course. Educators seek to maximize student potential, not profits. However, the business world’s practice of soliciting employee feedback is one that school systems could learn from and try to incorporate. Just as successful companies listen to their employees for ways to improve the production of goods and the delivery of services, high-performing schools respect the voices of their employees (teachers) and implement their suggestions to improve instruction and the way schools are run.*

Organizations that solicit and act on employee feedback tend to have higher levels of employee engagement, which, in turn, correlates with larger talent pools, lower turnover, and better

*For more on the importance of communication between labor and management, see “Strengthening Partnerships” in the Winter 2013–2014 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1314/rubinstein.pdf.

financial performance.¹ Managers in these organizations conduct surveys to gather the thoughtful ideas of their employees and then work with them to solve problems. While school systems differ from corporations in many ways, teacher feedback is equally relevant and useful in the school setting.

The Benefits of Using Surveys

Many of the leading private sector organizations have, for years, embraced a survey approach to improving products, services, and internal policies and processes. Like these successful private sector businesses, school systems can utilize a similar, survey-based approach to improving teacher evaluation. Here are the overarching benefits of thoughtful, intentional use of surveys in the evaluation process:

1. Surveys capture stakeholder feedback in a relatively quick and cost-effective way. Teachers are most likely to be accurate and reliable in assessing principals' performance, at least as it relates to teachers' evaluations. They can confirm if they are receiving feedback, and can assess the quality of feedback, guidance, and support they receive. This makes it more likely that evaluations will lead to improvements in teaching and learning.

2. Surveys can increase teacher engagement in the evaluation process. Clarity as to how decisions are made and the ability to influence the decision-making process (e.g., through providing feedback that is not just heard, but also acted upon) are important drivers of employee engagement.² Engaged teachers who believe their district is willing to learn from them and support them are not only more likely to stay with the district, but also more likely to look for opportunities to improve.

Also, giving teachers a voice in assessing the quality of feedback and supports they receive is likely to deepen teachers' acceptance of evaluations. This may be an especially important incentive to retain talented teachers, who expect to be consulted and to play an active role in constructing a healthy and professional work environment.

3. Surveys allow teacher growth and development to be valued explicitly. Teacher professional growth and development are both commonly cited as critical reasons for establishing new evaluations, but much of the early focus on evaluations was on compliance. Systems are collecting a lot of data to monitor observations (number of observations, range in ratings, correlation with other measures, etc.). This is legitimate administrative data that systems need to monitor to see whether the steps of the evaluation system are being implemented with fidelity. We are now at a critical inflection point. Using evaluation findings to enable teachers' growth and development needs to become an absolute priority equal to ensuring accuracy of observations.

Surveys offer the ability to articulate what is expected to happen during the evaluation and feedback process. Given competing priorities and limited time, what gets measured gets done. If teachers are asked whether strengths have been identified in addition to weaknesses, it creates the expectation that strengths will be identified. It is likely that leveraging strengths to mitigate weaknesses is an important aspect of improving performance. Systems that embrace this approach might want to ask specifi-

cally whether strengths have been identified. Likewise, if surveys ask whether feedback is connected to concrete improvement goals and development activities, it creates or reinforces an expectation that these aspects will be addressed and provides the basis for assessing quality of implementation.

4. Surveys are an important source of information on implementation issues. Data on student achievement will not be able to tell districts what worked or didn't work in the implementation of the evaluation process. Surveys, however, allow district and state administrators to obtain timely information on the quality of implementation, and to identify and address major challenges in implementation efforts. For example, a common implementation challenge cited by districts that have embraced evaluation system reform is the ability of principals to provide



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clear and actionable guidance to teachers. Since the quality of the guidance is essential to the efficacy of evaluations, it's vital to get information on how the feedback cycle is working so that schools needing additional attention are identified as soon as possible, and appropriate supports are provided to those principals who need them the most.

For context, the initial *Widget Effect* study from the New Teacher Project revealed that 26 percent of all teachers reported having at least one improvement area identified in districts where no meaningful evaluation systems had been put in place.³ When the system is working properly, virtually every teacher should be aware of development areas.

5. Surveys can promote a healthy school culture if used appropriately. When systems take teachers' perspectives into account, issues of school culture and leadership are more likely to be acknowledged and addressed. Teacher surveys can create an

opportunity for school leaders to model the type of openness to feedback and willingness to change that teachers are expected to embrace. Making district leaders, principals, and evaluators—not just teachers—focus on learning signals that everyone is responsible for improvement and balances the overriding focus on teacher accountability that has dominated conversations over the last few years. Holding school leaders accountable for improved results is a crucial part of this process.

It is important to keep in mind that surveys themselves do not solve problems. The data generated by surveys must lead to continuous improvement of the system. If systems administer surveys but the feedback is not incorporated, mistrust and doubt start to grow. Also, survey data should not be used in isolation; leaders need to triangulate the data from other sources and use their judgment. However, gathering input from teachers on their experiences provides direct, detailed, actionable information



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on what is working, and what isn't, in new evaluation systems. When teacher survey results are shared transparently and used to adjust practice, it sends a clear signal that teachers' input is needed and valued. Taking action on such feedback is not easy, but doing so can yield significant improvements in the evaluation system over time.

In the longer term, some school systems might want to develop a single survey, given once annually, to ask about all aspects of the employee experience, including evaluation and professional development. However, in the short term, given that rigorous evaluation and feedback systems are still in relative infancy, we recommend a laser-like focus on evaluation system implementation and, therefore, a survey that focuses specifically on the implementation and impact of the evaluation process. This kind of survey may need to be administered more frequently, possibly two or three times a year.

Improving the Teacher Evaluation Process with Surveys

In examining the use of surveys in organizations that believe in continuous improvement, we identified several practices critical to effectively surveying employees and utilizing the information to improve individual and organizational performance. What stands out is that the organizations' processes for sharing and acting on

survey data are as important as the collection of the underlying data itself. Organizations that have been most successful in engaging their employees have made a real investment of time and resources into a whole range of internal practices, including human resource solutions (mentorship, skill development, career development, and compensation reform) and engagement mechanisms (ranging from surveys to focus groups to teams focused on designing solutions). None of these organizations collects the information for compliance or public reporting purposes; the information is a vital component of organizational learning, reciprocal accountability, and continuous improvement.

In education, supporting professional growth is not the sole purpose of evaluation, of course; employment and tenure decisions are directly affected, and there are additional implications for compensation, preparation, and recruitment. But even under the most rigorous systems, the overwhelming majority of teachers fall in the middle of evaluation ratings, so the biggest prize lies in leveraging evaluations to improve performance of current teachers.

Achieving this requires bolstering the capacity of district and school leaders to: (1) share developmental information with teachers in constructive ways; (2) design and provide reliable access to professional development that addresses areas of weaker performance; and (3) work with teachers over time to assess the efficacy of improvement efforts. This kind of formative focus would be a significant departure from the way evaluations were conducted prior to the wave of current evaluation reforms, mainly as compliance exercises if they were done at all.

The following are concrete ways for getting the most out of surveys in improving the teacher evaluation process.

Engage Key Stakeholders

Districts can take advantage of existing advisory panels or committees to gather input ahead of creating or launching an important survey. If there are specific groups of teachers the district is trying to retain, they should be consulted in this process. This can also be a good engagement and collaboration opportunity with teachers' unions and associations. Whatever the engagement mechanism, it is important to make sure teachers have authentic opportunities to shape the work and aren't merely asked to watch a presentation about what's already planned.

Decide What You Want to Know and Can Act On

Once districts decide on the purpose of the survey, they can tailor questions accordingly. Surveys signal what the system values, so system leaders should make sure the questions produce information that is important and that the system intends to act on. In the area of teacher evaluations and teacher effectiveness, there are at least four potential topics on which districts could focus: fidelity of implementation, impact of evaluation on teachers, teachers' experience of support and development, and teachers' overall impression of the evaluation system.

Leverage Existing Survey Mechanisms to the Extent Possible

Many districts and schools today administer multiple surveys throughout the year (to varying degrees of effectiveness), including annual climate surveys as well as surveys around professional development, new teacher support, instructional reforms, pilot initiatives, departmental supports, and more. Where possible,

districts should incorporate questions on evaluation and support into existing surveys or online processes. If past surveys haven't been used effectively or seen as important, consider an independent survey administration or other strategies to ensure a fresh start for surveys related to assessing teacher evaluation efforts.

Share Results with Key Stakeholders at the District and School Levels, and Take Action

Districts have a wide variety of options to communicate with their stakeholders, but should first create a clear strategy for communicating survey results to a broad range of stakeholders. Teachers need to see the results as a first step in demonstrating that the system takes survey findings seriously. Principals need to see the results and learn how to analyze them and engage others, including teachers, in establishing action steps. Supervisors of principals need to use the data in supporting and managing principals' performance. Central office administrators, the superintendent, and the school board need to examine the data for patterns, progress, and overall health of the system's culture.

The schedule for sharing data, convening stakeholders to analyze and plan, and exercising oversight from senior management should be established and communicated up front to guard against the results being neglected.

Follow-through determines whether surveys have positive impact. If they are administered but the results never acknowledged publicly, or if results are published but no action is clearly connected to the process, then surveys can reinforce negative impressions of school systems as nonresponsive and the process as nothing more than a waste of time.

Local leaders need to be held accountable for responding to survey results. Processes for engaging employees, developing action plans, and following up to see whether progress was made need to become part of the culture of the organization. Senior managers must model this openness and include these issues into supervisory discussions and performance evaluation ratings.

Ideally, districts should disaggregate survey results by school, and use school-level results and subsequent actions taken by a school leader in assessing the school leader's effectiveness. Districts must encourage and empower school leaders to implement changes and hold them accountable for doing so, while also ensuring that the right supports are in place to make them effective. Tracking principal responses to survey results should be an important responsibility for principal supervisors.

While it is crucial for school leaders to take ownership of issues identified at the school level, some issues cut across many schools and suggest responsibility at the system level. For instance, if a teacher survey were to reveal a common pattern across the district in the quantity and quality of feedback given to teachers, the district would likely need to ramp up its evaluator training and create meaningful accountability regarding quality of feedback provided by evaluators. Similarly, if teachers consistently identify a specific area of weak professional development, the district may need to come up with a system-wide approach to increasing and improving resources in this area.

That said, taking appropriate action is the most critical step for schools and districts to get right. If no action comes out of the survey process, not only will the evaluation system stagnate, but teachers will lose faith and disengage. Responsibilities and timelines for

processing and publishing survey results and following up should be established by the district by the time surveys are launched to encourage feedback and continuous improvement.

Ask about Effectiveness of Solutions over Time

At one leading software company, the human resources department has developed, and continuously improves, a "work health" survey taken by every employee in the organization. The results are aggregated at the team and manager levels, and are made publicly available. Managers can see whether their ratings have improved over time, and there is incentive to improve as the results of the survey are part of the manager's year-end evaluation.

The concept of assessing progress over time is especially important in teacher evaluations because there has been a massive new investment in using evaluations as a lever for teacher and student improvement. It is vital to track whether teachers and others are perceiving improvements in the implementation of evaluation reform. Such a focus will go a long way toward building employee trust in the system and a commitment to making evaluation really work in schools. In the end, continuous improvement of the system itself can communicate the system's values more persuasively than any policy directive.

Preserve Anonymity to Guarantee Honesty

Especially in the current environment around evaluations, anonymous surveys are much more likely to elicit candid responses without fear of individual repercussions. At least in the short to medium term, while this work is nascent, anonymity needs to be preserved to encourage honest feedback that can effectively shape the evaluation and development systems.

Current evaluation efforts will be for naught unless teachers feel an ownership stake in the effort to define expectations, provide feedback, and continuously improve instruction. Displacing deep-seated cultural norms—such as compliance mentality, unwillingness to acknowledge distinctions in effectiveness, a "this-too-shall-pass" neglect of new policy initiatives—with a culture of openness and continuous improvement will only come about as a result of deliberate focus and strategic implementation.

Surveys can create vital information quickly, reliably, and relatively inexpensively (important in an era of austerity). They provide a tangible vehicle for expressing values and priorities, and assessing leadership quality and organizational health, which is why they are used by so many high-performing organizations in the private, public, and education sectors. Surveys respect teachers' voice, provide diagnostic information regarding principals and schools, and give system leaders an invaluable, authentic lens into implementation.

School systems that establish a culture of openness—by welcoming feedback, sharing survey results publicly, collaborating on action plans, and repeating the cycle to assess progress and identify new challenges—have the best chances of improving. When done well, surveys help turn data into action, reinforce the stated focus on teachers' growth and development, build healthier school cultures, and support continuous improvement at the individual, school, and system level. □

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Endnotes

1. James K. Harter, Frank L. Schmidt, Emily K. Killham, and James W. Asplund, *Q12 Meta-Analysis* (Omaha, NE: Gallup, 2006); Aon Hewitt, *Trends in Global Employee Engagement* (Lincolnshire, IL: Aon Hewitt, 2011); Rob Markey, "Transform Your Employees into Passionate Advocates," *HBR Blog Network*, *Harvard Business Review*, January 27, 2012, <http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/01/transform-your-employees-into>; and Great Place to Work Institute, *Lessons from the Turnaround of Mercedes-Benz USA* (San Francisco: Great Place to Work Institute, 2011).
2. Aon Hewitt, *2012 Trends in Global Employee Engagement* (Lincolnshire, IL: Aon Hewitt, 2012).
3. Daniel Weisberg, Susan Sexton, Jennifer Mulhern, and David Keeling, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (Brooklyn, NY: The New Teacher Project, 2009).



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