

An Introduction to School District Surveys

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What is a Survey?

A survey has two critical attributes:

1. A survey will ask questions.
2. Through asking questions, a survey will elicit the nature and the strength of the opinions or perceptions of the respondents.

Uses of surveys

Schools and school districts may use a survey alone for some purposes, such as assessing how the community views the school's programs. More frequently, schools use surveys as part of a larger evaluation design. For example, attitudinal data might be used to track changes in the school's program or to explain student outcomes.

Types of Surveys

The written questionnaire is the most common survey approach. Oral interviews are also used quite frequently. This discussion of surveys will include descriptions of both, and also of less traditional questioning approaches such as focus groups and student writing and drawing.

Increasing the Efficiency of Instruments through Technology

Recent developments in technology make it possible to refine traditional survey methods for greater efficiency. One of the difficulties inherent in questionnaires is their dependence on the respondents to return them. One approach allows schools to use touch-tone technology to administer telephone surveys. Districts that have used this technology see it as a useful part of a communications strategy.

The Internet also offers survey resources. Schools can use the results of national surveys, often posted on the World Wide Web, as baseline data against which to compare the results of the same survey administered to a local audience. These surveys can also provide sample questions to use locally.

Using Surveys in an Accountability Framework

A successful accountability system for any comprehensive school-improvement effort must incorporate three elements:

1. Responsibility
By whom? For what? To whom?
2. Optimal Conditions and Resources
*Will, Leadership, Money, Skills
Time, Climate, Public Engagement*
3. Continuous and Reflective Use of Data

Surveys can support accountability in each of these three areas:

1. *Responsibility*

Because surveys are frequently used to find out the views of all stakeholders, surveys can be a first step in establishing more formal accountability partnerships. For example, survey data that identify program needs can serve as a springboard for discussions among all of the educational partners about who should take responsibility for meeting each need.

2. *Optimal Conditions and Resources*

The school faculty must demonstrate the will to confront evidence that may conflict with their own views or ways of doing things and to make necessary changes. Because the data can raise difficult issues, a school climate of openness and trust is essential.

The principal and other school leaders play a key leadership role in enlisting faculty support for a schoolwide evaluation process, organizing the process, and finding the time and money needed to do it well. The principal plays an equally important role in establishing the needed climate for reflective inquiry.

Data collection and analysis call for many skills beyond those normally associated with classroom teaching. Although teachers collect and analyze data all of the time inside the classroom, they are usually less familiar with doing so on a schoolwide or communitywide basis. Designing the study and analyzing the data can be quite complex and can benefit from expert help. In addition, because data can make classroom practices more public and can reveal conflicting opinions that had previously been unspoken, group process skills are also important. An outside facilitator can sometimes help schools talk about sensitive issues raised by survey and other data.

3. Continuous and Reflective Use of Data

Surveys make an especially strong contribution to a cycle of inquiry such as the process. That process, which is ongoing, is part of building and sustaining a culture of reflection and action in a school, in which repeating activities interweave action and reflection.

Surveys help schools to collect important data. Surveys by themselves can yield powerful data at the start of an evaluation process. Survey data from a broad segment of the population can prompt the kind of dialogue about goals, beliefs, and expectations that school communities need to have in order to establish desired outcomes. The data can point out differing perceptions about standards or appropriate use of resources, and can help those in the school community understand one another's perspectives. Such data, used wisely, can stimulate ongoing inquiry and decision making about what is essential for all children to know and be able to do; can identify needs; and can help to define the questions that will lead to further investigation and spur action.

A Typical Survey Project Plan

- 1. Develop a list of survey objectives (expected outcomes).*
- 2. Develop a list of potential action steps reflecting the outcomes.*
- 3. Develop a list of potential contingency steps reflecting changes in the action steps or outcomes.*
- 4. Secure management's commitment and support.*
- 5. Assign or nominate a project administrator\manager\coordinator.*
- 6. Determine the survey delivery methods available.*
- 7. Develop a projected budget for all of the survey costs.*
- 8. Select **Analysis Survey Services** to help design and administer the survey.*
- 9. Develop a schedule for key dates of the survey project.*
- 10. Decide what demographics are relevant to your survey.*
- 11. Decide upon the survey sampling techniques.*
- 12. Decide what topics are to be addressed in the survey.*
- 13. Draft a cover letter to accompany the survey.*
- 14. Review the audience list for integrity and enter it into a software application*
- 15. Determine the survey delivery methods you will employ based on your audience list.*
- 16. Print surveys and prepare to present them to the respondents.*
- 17. Coordinate the administering of the surveys.*
- 18. Retrieve returned surveys from the mail, disk, e-mail, web, etc.*
- 19. Enter or read data from the returned surveys into software.*
- 20. Analyze the data and develop a survey report.*
- 21. Present the results to management.*
- 22. Present the feedback to respondents/audience.*