THE COLORADO EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Students Giving Feedback about Teaching:
A Mutually Beneficial Endeavor

The use of student feedback has been shown to impact both teachers and students positively. On the one hand, student perception data provides teachers with a unique form of feedback from engaged observers that spend hundreds of hours in their classrooms. On the other hand, students are given a forum in which they can be heard, and this emphasis on student voice promotes both reflection and responsibility on the part of the students.

STUDENTS AS EXPERTS ON INSTRUCTION

The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) used an extensive pilot process to develop Colorado's Student Perception Survey. As part of the pilot process, students had two significant opportunities to provide open-ended feedback on instruction: (1) think-aloud interviews conducted by CEI with individual students during the development process and (2) open-ended questions that all students had the opportunity to answer at the end of the survey. Findings from both of these sources suggest that students are not only taking the opportunity to provide feedback to their teachers very seriously, but also that they recognize good instructional practices and can describe them in detail.

Think-aloud interviews

An important step in the development of assessments and surveys is ensuring that respondents are interpreting the questions as intended. One way to explore this is through *think-aloud* interviews. In think-alouds, respondents are asked to talk through each question and their response out loud as they complete the survey.

As part of developing Colorado's Student Perception Survey, CEI selected students that represented a variety of grade levels, and demographic areas. For each grade span (3-5, 6-12), we selected students to ensure we had representation from each of the following groups:

1. Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
2. Students of color
3. English Language Learners
4. Students with disabilities
5. Geographic diversity with regard to region (e.g., across school districts,) and setting (e.g, urban, suburban, and rural).

Overall, the results from the think-aloud interviews were very positive and encouraging. Overwhelmingly, students of all backgrounds were able to engage with the questions and provide thoughtful feedback on their teachers' instructional practices. Below are some direct quotes from students who participated in think-aloud interviews:

- ***In this class, it is more important to understand the lesson than to memorize the answers.*** "She cares a lot more about understanding instead of memorizing because she says if we memorize it we might not know what it is. Once she read a list of ingredients and showed that she could read it and memorize it but still not know what it means." (5th grader)

- ***My teacher uses a lot of different ways to explain things.*** "Definitely. If one person says they do not understand, she tells three or four other ways to explain it, and even if no one raises their hand she still gives other ways of explaining because she knows it can be embarrassing to say you don't understand." (5th grader)
- ***My teacher knows when we understand the lesson and when we do not.*** "Most of the time. One of my friends didn't understand, and when she asked if they all understood he didn't say anything [and the teacher didn't know]." (8th grader)
- ***I feel like an important part of my classroom community.*** "Always. This means to help learn and support my class, be kind and respectful. I feel like my class is a good community." (3rd grader)
- ***I feel like I do a good job in this class.*** "Most of the time. When the work is too hard I don't feel like I did so well, that was before she started doing different worksheets for different kids." (5th grader)
- ***My teacher accepts nothing less than my best effort.*** "Always. He would always know for every student, and especially for me, if I was distracted or not engaged, or if I didn't get the grade I deserved on the test he would ask me if I was making wise choices." (11th grader)
- ***If I don't understand something, my teacher explains it a different way.*** "Always. If I don't understand something, she will write things in a different way." (9th grader)
- ***My teacher explains difficult things clearly.*** "Always. He would always have different methods of explaining, it would be really hard but he would make it clear." (11th grader)
- ***My teacher writes notes on my work that help me improve.*** "Always. During test and stuff he would know his students really well, he would write his concerns, he was really helpful." (11th grader)
- ***My teacher knows if something is bothering me.*** "Some of the time. I can hide my emotions very well… Sometimes when I am sad or frustrated she'll come over to me and talk to me." (9th grader)
- ***The students behave the way my teacher wants them to.*** "Most of the time. In the beginning of the year he made the class really fun, which made it really easy for the students to connect with him. And because of the bond, we would know when it was time to work or time to be quiet." (11th grader)
- ***Our classroom materials (books, articles, videos, art, music, posters, etc.) reflect my cultural background.*** "No, not at all...Some classes do represent it, when we are in [this] class it is based around what the majority in the class is." (11th grader)
- ***My teacher respects my cultural background.*** "Always. He would try to relate to it, so he wouldn't feel too out of place. He would always come back to our cultural background." (11th grader)

Open-ended survey responses

At the end of the survey students were asked, "*Do you have any other thoughts or feedback for your teacher?*" The majority of student responses to this question were actionable, demonstrating that students take the survey seriously and provide substantive feedback about their instructional experiences. Several key themes emerged from the responses, including:

Critical thinking
- "[He] is a very good teacher that makes you think about problems critically instead of just giving us the answers."
- "This teacher is very good! He really emphasizes the big picture of things and why and not just answers like dates, names, etc."

Differentiation
- "…you are the best teacher this year for me. I'm a very visual learner and all the experiment[s] help me understand. So thanks for actually getting me to like science again."

- "She tends to teach with just speaking and not much examples/doing...I often have a hard time understanding the tougher concepts because of this."
- "She restates ideas in different ways to reach kids that comprehend things differently."
- "She needs to learn to teach concepts multiple times in different ways so that we have multiple [opportunities] to understand the material being covered."
- "My teacher is really nice and I want to be in her class when I'm in 4th grade. [She] helps me learn 3D shapes by letting me use one if I really need it."
- "My teacher understands that people learn in different ways and so she does a great job of challenging the advanced kids, giving the average kids work for their level of understanding, and giving the struggling kids plenty of reassuring help and encouragement."

Connections to "real life"
- "You are my favorite teacher, you always make the class interesting and more importantly you make it easy to see how it applies to life outside of school."
- "Well, I think that [he] is doing a good job as a teacher. I really like how he can connect Biology to other things in real life."

HOW STUDENT FEEDBACK FOSTERS A POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE[1]

School culture has been shown to be a critical factor in student success. Research has shown that strategies aimed at getting to the heart of how students *feel* –their sense of safety, belonging, connectedness and confidence- can transform school-wide culture, as well as reduce bullying and peer victimization. In other words, to transform school culture, you must create a community of care, evidenced by students with strong skills to persevere, resolve conflict, manage emotions, engage in pro-social activities, engage with peers, partner with adults and cope with disappointment, anxiety and other stressors involved in their lives. Student Perception Surveys offer a research-based, systematic way to capture evidence of culture on both classroom- and school-wide levels. Several non-cognitive factors captured on Colorado's Student Perception Survey are:

- Students' motivation to learn and to attend school
- The relevance of what they see and hear to their life experience and future ambitions
- Their feelings about themselves as smart or capable
- The extent to which they feel people at school care about them, respect them and trust them
- Their sense of belonging to their school community or feeling of being marginalized, isolated, different, and unwelcome

Research demonstrates that these factors have a direct impact on increasing academic achievement, with a 2011 study showing that evidence-based instruction in social and emotional learning boosts academic achievement by, on average, eleven points on standardized tests.[2] Social emotional learning, with its attention to safety, connection, and support; challenge and engagement; and a school culture in which most individuals can productively manage and control their emotions improves the conditions for learning that appear to be equally important to teaching and to child/youth development, especially for kids in poverty or who experience other factors that place them at risk.[3]

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[1] For more information on school climate and culture see The Colorado Education Initiative's *Transforming School Climate Toolkit.*

[2] Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., and Schellinger, K.B. (2011) The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82(1), 405-432.

[3] Osher, D., Sidana, A., & Kelly, P. (2008) Improving conditions for learning for youth who are neglected or delinquent. Washington, D.C.: National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth who are Delinquent, Neglected, or at Risk.
Osher,D. et al (2007) A comprehensive approach to promoting social, emotional and academic growth in contemporary schools. Best Practices in School Psychology