



THE
COLORADO
EDUCATION
INITIATIVE

**POSITIONING STUDENTS AS EXPERTS ON
INSTRUCTION: AN ANALYSIS OF OPEN-ENDED
RESPONSES FROM THE STUDENT PERCEPTION
SURVEY**

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SURVEY PURPOSE AND GOALS

In the spring of 2013, The Colorado Education Initiative piloted a student perception survey (SPS) in 16 school districts across Colorado to engage elementary and secondary students in the educator effectiveness conversation.¹ The survey asked students to respond to a variety of closed-ended questions concerning their teachers and classroom environments. Students could also respond freely to the question “*Do you have any other thoughts or feedback for your teacher?*” via an open-response option at the end of the survey. This report highlights key findings of the open-ended response data from Colorado students. In particular, we were interested in whether students took the survey seriously and in what ways responses were substantive in nature. This analysis can help address teacher and district concerns about the SPS and emerging questions about how student feedback will be used in conjunction with other measures of teacher effectiveness.

In the second phase of analysis, student responses were coded for whether or not students commented on or made suggestions regarding the instructional practices in their classroom. These “instructional responses” were grouped into more specific categories that emerged from the data itself and represent more nuanced aspects of instruction.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This analysis of approximately 14,500 open-ended responses from both elementary and secondary students finds that the majority of students took the survey seriously, and many of the responses were specific and actionable in nature. (Teachers could likely alter or maintain their practices given student feedback.) Actionable responses came from students in all grades (3-12) and from a variety of different types of classrooms (including music, art, and physical education). Several themes emerged from the responses, including the *help* provided by teachers for enhanced understanding of material, *personal relationships and connections* with teachers, the *care* shown to students by teachers, teachers’ *content knowledge*, how *prepared* students felt for future endeavors (including assessments), *instruction*, *classroom management*, *respect* between students and teachers, *grading policies*, issues of *justice and fairness*, and issues of *student voice and choice*.

With regard to students’ views on instruction, we find that “students view good teaching and learning in a remarkably consistent and elegantly simple way.”² Several themes emerged from these responses, including *clarity of explanation*, teacher-provided *tools for learning* (physical and experiential), teachers’ *pace of instruction*, *assessment design*, *allotted time on task*, connections to *real-life experience*, *differentiation*, and opportunities for *critical thinking*.³ These themes not only indicate that students are in tune with how their teachers are teaching, but that they also have a sophisticated sense of what effective instruction looks and feels like in practice, and what they may need from their teachers to be more successful in school. These results suggest that students are well-poised to respond substantively — and even actionably — to survey items about the teaching practices they experience.

¹Beginning in the spring of 2012 and concluding in the summer of 2013, The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) developed and piloted a student perception survey to gather information about students’ experiences in teachers’ classrooms. CEI engaged Julia Kantor, an independent external evaluator, to analyze students’ responses to the open-ended question that appeared at the end of the survey. This report presents a summary and findings of that analysis.

²Wilson, B., and Corbett, D. “Student Perceptions on Good Teaching: Implications for Adult Reform Behavior.” In *International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary School*. Thiessen, D., and Cook-Sather, A. (eds.). Springer, 2007 238-311.

³While some of these aspects of instruction certainly overlap (e.g., connections to real-life experience is also a tool for learning), student references to each aspect were distinct enough to create separate categories.

Methods of Analysis

Among the almost 30,000 student responses to the SPS were 14,539 responses to the question “*Do you have any other thoughts or feedback for your teacher?*”⁴ These responses were coded as substantive (the student response was on-topic and provided at least a general statement about the teacher and/or classroom environment) or off-topic (the student’s provided written response did not address the question). The substantive responses were then coded as actionable or not, where an actionable response represented feedback specific enough for teachers to take action to alter or maintain their current classroom practices. For example, the response, “My teacher is great!” would be deemed substantive but not actionable, whereas “My teacher is great because he provides us with multiple ways of understanding the material” would be considered actionable.

Next, actionable responses were categorized thematically to get a sense of the overall trends across student feedback. This step revealed high-level insights into the nature of the actionable student responses and an overall sense of the feedback students had for their teachers.

In the second phase of analysis, a random sample of 20 percent (N=1955) of the actionable responses (N=9643) was taken. This sample was coded for whether or not students commented on or made suggestions regarding the instructional practices in their classroom. These instructional responses were grouped into more specific categories that emerged from the data itself and represent more nuanced aspects of instruction. Themes from the entire data set and this sample set are outlined below, supported by representative quotes.

⁴Excluded from this number are the approximately 1,500 students who answered “No” or its equivalent to the open-ended question. These responses were placed in the “nonresponse” group.

Dominant Trends Across All Responses

Of the 14,539 student responses to the open-ended question, 98.6 percent (N=14,341) were considered substantive (i.e., they were on-topic and provided general information about what the student thought about a teacher). This finding was consistent across grades and subject areas. (See Tables 1 and 2.)

Table 1. Percent of Responses Coded as Substantive or Actionable, By Subject Area

Subject Area	Percent Substantive	Percent Actionable
Art	98.8%	55.6%
Elementary (Homeroom)	99.1%	60.2%
Language Arts	98.4%	68.8%
Mathematics	98.5%	72.7%
Music	98.1%	68.6%
Physical Education and Health	98.0%	59.4%
Science	98.9%	72.3%
Social Studies	98.6%	70.1%
World Languages	98.6%	74.9%

Table 2. Percent of Responses Coded as Substantive or Actionable, By Grade

Grade	Percent Substantive	Percent Actionable
3	98.6%	45.8%
4	98.6%	60.3%
5	99.5%	69.7%
6	99.4%	69.6%
7	98.7%	68.1%
8	97.3%	69.2%
9	98.0%	66.9%
10	98.6%	70.0%
11	98.8%	73.9%
12	98.6%	70.7%

66.3 percent of student responses (N=9,646) were coded as actionable, meaning that they contained specific feedback that teachers could likely act upon. Although student responses in some subjects and grades were slightly more likely to provide actionable feedback (e.g., students in higher grades and in core academic subjects), in general, actionable responses came from students in *all* grades (3-12) and from a variety of classroom types (including music, art, and physical education).

In general, the actionable responses from students can be categorized into the following themes (described in greater detail below):⁵

⁵Because the purpose of this analysis was to explore the extent to which student responses were substantive and actionable, dominant themes identified in these responses were not quantified (e.g., percent of responses for each theme). They were, however, identified to show evidence of students taking the survey seriously and providing important feedback for their teachers. Furthermore, because of the final number of student responses (roughly half of the pilot sample), we do not believe these responses are necessarily representative of all students' perception of their teachers and classrooms.

- Help for understanding
- Personal relationships
- Care
- Content knowledge
- Preparation for the future
- Instruction
- Classroom management
- Respect
- Grading
- Justice and fairness
- Student voice and choice

In some cases, students’ responses touched on matters of particular sensitivity and importance to school climate, such as race, gender, and bullying. Responses of this nature can help school and district leaders confront serious problems that may be hidden because students lack a safe place to discuss them. We have included a few responses of this type below to accurately convey the range and depth of topics that students addressed, and to help school and district leaders build a vision for how an SPS can aid efforts to [create safe, welcoming school environments for all students](#).

HELP FOR UNDERSTANDING

Students commented on the additional help they received from their teachers when they needed to be more successful in school. Following are representative responses⁶ that demonstrate this theme:

- “This teacher is a very good teacher. She helps me with everything I need help on and if I still don’t get the question or lesson, she will help me and explain it better to me until I understand.” (Grade 6)
- “Sometimes my teacher doesn’t help me when I need it. Sometimes I feel scared to ask for help.” (Grade 5)
- “When I look like I am having a hard time, she helps me most of the time.” (Grade 4)
- “I love him as a teacher but when I need help, I usually don’t get help from him. He just tells me to go to another student for help.” (Grade 10)

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Students referred to the ways their teachers connected with them and got to know them beyond the classroom context. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “You’re an amazing teacher. I really love being in your class. ... I also really love how much you can relate to your students. It takes your relationship with your students to a more personal level, which makes it so that the student feels like you’re someone to trust.” (Grade 6)
- “Wow, I just really love [teacher name]. She’s my favorite teacher. I just have to stop and think about how lucky I am to have such an amazing teacher like her because she understands me and treats me like family. It makes me feel really cared for and loved.” (Grade 11)
- “You are my favorite teacher because you always make learning fun and explain things clearly and help the students when they need it. Try to learn about students’ personal [lives] a little more so you can tell when something’s wrong or understand students and what their life is like.” (Grade 6)

CARE

⁶Spelling and grammar have been edited in responses without changing the meaning of student comments.

Students referred to the care shown by their teachers. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “You are a very respecting, kind, caring, loving, and wonderful teacher, and I know that every time things get tough, I can go to you for help or support, and I just want to thank you.” (Grade 4)
- “I feel like my teacher doesn’t like me. She doesn’t care. When I’m hurt, my teacher will sometimes say you’re OK.” (Grade 5)
- “She honestly cares about us as students. As a theater teacher, people do not always rank her as the highest of importance to other teachers. But she is the go-to teacher when we need help, whether it be in our theater life, school life, or personal life. She is always there to lend an ear and help in any way she possibly can. When she tells us she loves her students, she truly means it.” (Grade 11)

CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

Students referred to their teacher’s knowledge of the subject or discipline. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “[My teacher] has a wealth of knowledge in her subject and constantly searches for new ways to present the material that are relevant to students. I believe she could improve in her understanding of the IB curriculum as she is only a first-year IB teacher and seems to get stuck in an AP format when trying to teach IB.” (Grade 12)
- “Very good teacher and knows a lot of the material. Very well-educated in everything that is taught and provides a lot of help when it is needed. Also, she works with you if something is wrong and is very reasonable.” (Grade 11)
- “[Teacher name] is a lovely music teacher. She knows a lot and picks music that she thinks will interest the whole class.” (Grade 7)

PREPARATION FOR THE FUTURE

Students referred to their teachers’ ability to prepare students for future endeavors, including more advanced classes or grades, college, jobs, and assessments. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

Advanced Classes/Grades, College, Jobs

- “I’ve known [teacher name] for three years, and she knows me and I know her. We work on what is necessary and I know she knows what I need to learn. I know what I need to learn, too. What I do with her in classes makes me think, ‘She is teaching me this for a reason. I will figure out why she is teaching this. She is teaching this because I will need these skills in the future.’” (Grade 4)
- “[Teacher name] is one of the best teachers I have had, and he makes learning fun for all of the students. ... When I need help for a future job in my life, he helps me find jobs of what I like to do and want to be.” (Grade 9)
- “Most students don’t care for this teacher. Sometimes he comes off [as] shy/alooof, and that bothers a few. Also, he does assign a lot of homework, and sometimes can’t get through what he’s grading in time (e.g., editing our essays). But, it’s all coming from a good place. He wants us to understand the materials and prepare us for the college workload.” (Grade 12)

Assessments

- “[Teacher name] is the most amazing teacher at [school name]. She is literally the only teacher who 1. teaches EVERYTHING that is on the CFAs⁷ and/or tests, [and] 2. reviews what the class

⁷ CFA refers to Common Formative Assessment.

needs help on and explains it so it's quick and easy to understand right before a difficult test." (Grade 10)

- "When there is going to be a large section about something on a test, spend more time on it instead of just glimpsing over the information." (Grade 8)
- "There are major concepts on AP practice exams which weren't covered adequately in class, so I wish the class was more consistent with AP material on the test." (Grade 12)

INSTRUCTION

Students referred to the instruction they experienced or did not experience in their classroom. These responses include suggestions for future instructional practices and comments about the nature of this instruction. (**Note:** A closer analysis of instruction follows this section.) Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- "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." (Grade 4)
- "Sometimes I feel like [teacher name] just brushes on the surface of things, never really getting into the 'nitty-gritty.' Our lessons sometimes seem slightly one-dimensional. A student will ask a "why" question instead of the comfortable "what," and she will sometimes respond with something like, 'Well, that's just how it is.'" (Grade 11)
- "She restates ideas in different ways to reach kids that comprehend things differently." (Grade 8)
- "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." (Grade 11)

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Students referred to their teacher's ability and willingness to manage student behavior in the classroom. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- "While I might get angry at her for being so persistent about every other little detail, I know [teacher name] is a great teacher. She is always so helpful and understanding. She has improved since the beginning of the year with handling inappropriate and unacceptable behavior." (Grade 4)
- "Well, when the class is really rowdy, she doesn't exactly do anything about it. She usually just says, "Guys, quiet down," and it's really hard to learn. Kids in class are always browsing around everywhere, talking to people, and it's distracting." (Grade 6)
- "She instills discipline in the classroom, but harbors an environment of acceptance and excitement to learn." (Grade 11)
- "Yes, I feel like a lot of kids are bullied and no one notices." (Grade 5)

RESPECT

Students referred to the respect they had for their teachers and/or the respect they got from their teachers. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- "This teacher tells me she likes me, but I do not feel respected in this class." (Grade 11)
- "She pushes us way too hard in Fitness and I feel like she doesn't have respect for those of us who are not as fit as others. She does not realize when people feel uncomfortable or are being bullied." (Grade 9)

GRADING

Students referred to the grading policies and practices in their classroom. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “When grading tests, try giving an answer partial credit for getting [a] majority of the question correct. Instead, one small mistake results in a full 0 on the question.” (Grade 10)
- “She grades based on personal opinion of work and student rather than grading based on the rubrics she hands out and says that’s what she grades from.” (Grade 12)

JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS

Students referred to fairness in their classrooms, particularly in terms of how they or others are treated in relation to other students or groups. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “My teacher is awesome! I feel like I can talk about anything to her. She is nice to each and every one even if she likes one better than the other. I know that she doesn’t care about your skin color, just about our personality.” (Grade 5)
- “You single out students very frequently and do not treat all students the same.” (Grade 8)
- “... He doesn’t treat everybody the same way, and he makes people feel uncomfortable in his class.” (Grade 9)
- “She shows racist videos and she constantly puts me in an uncomfortable spot in front of the whole class.” (Grade 8)

STUDENT VOICE AND CHOICE

Students referred to the degree to which they felt listened to in their class and/or the amount of choice they had in the curriculum. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “You are an amazing teacher and make me (and hopefully others, too) overjoyed to be one of your students. You make me feel like I always fit in and can express my ideas without being afraid to talk to you or the class out loud or in private.” (Grade 5)
- “[Teacher name] needs to treat kids better and have more respect for them and their thoughts and opinions.” (Grade 6)
- “I like it that she respects my thoughts.” (Grade 3)
- “When I try to state my opinions or ask questions, he just gets mad and walks away. Also, when I try to have a conversation with him stating my opinions on some things, he tells me I’m being disrespectful and to stop.” (Grade 8)
- “I always feel sad because the teacher never listens to me.” (Grade 3)

A Closer Look: Students' Views on Instruction

Of the 1,955 student responses sampled from those determined actionable, 26 percent referred to instruction in the classroom. The following eight themes emerged from the student responses referring to their teachers' instructional practices (described in greater detail below):

- Explanation
- Tools for learning
- Pace of instruction
- Assessments
- Time on task
- Real-life experiences
- Differentiation
- Critical thinking

EXPLANATION

Students referred to the amount and/or clarity of explanations their teacher gave concerning work or task directions. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “She is amazing. ... I wouldn't ask for a better English teacher. Right now we are reading [a complex text] and it is very confusing, but she explains it all very well.” (Grade 9)
- “I've had to do a lot of outside studying because I don't feel like she does a good job at explaining things clearly.” (Grade 10)
- “She explains the questions/problems in a way that is understandable.” (Grade 6)
- “[Teacher name] does a great job of explaining everything he teaches, and when we don't understand it, he goes back over it to make sure that everyone gets it before we move on.” (Grade 10)

TOOLS FOR LEARNING

Students referred to the various tools that their teacher gave them to help them learn content and skills. They commented on the physical (e.g., textbooks, notes) and experiential (e.g., demonstrations, discussions) tools that their teachers did or did not provide. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

Physical

- “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.” (Grade 3)
- “Overall [teacher name] does an excellent job at making sure we put in the effort to understand trigonometry. ... I like that lately she has added more quizzes and review packets before a test so that we know what to expect.” (Grade 11)
- “[Teacher name] makes us teach ourselves most of the time. With homework, none of us know how to do what she is assigning. We need the notes to know how and she doesn't give us the notes until the day the homework is due, so that doesn't help us.” (Grade 10)
- “[Teacher name] is a pretty good teacher. He tries very hard to help us learn French and is pretty good at it. I just don't like the teaching style. We frequently use textbooks that are not very fun, nor are they helpful in learning French.” (Grade 10)

Experiential

- “[Teacher name] is a great teacher! In First Aid, she gives us demos when we need to learn CPR, AED, or other things so that we really understand what to do in an emergency situation.” (Grade 10)

- “Great teacher. ... A lot of solo learning, such as reading and writing assignments. More class discussion would be a better benefit towards learning.” (Grade 10)
- “[Teacher name] is awesome, but should do more hands-on experiments to make class more interesting and understandable.” (Grade 6)
- “She is one of my favorite teachers of the day. She always uses stories as well as life experiences and culture to explain and add things that catch our attention during lessons.” (Grade 8)

PACE OF INSTRUCTION

Students referred to how quickly their teachers taught them. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “She is very nice, but sometimes she goes too fast over new subjects and it is hard to understand.” (Grade 10)
- “She’s a great teacher. [She] connects with the students as if they’re her friends but the lesson can go slow sometimes.” (Grade 8)
- “She goes really fast and doesn’t explain things or lessons correctly. She gives us too much work and doesn’t give us to time to do the work, only like 20 minutes and we never finish.” (Grade 11)
- “My teacher likes to move quickly. That’s good, but sometimes it can get confusing.” (Grade 8)

ASSESSMENTS

Students referred to the qualities of the assessments they were given throughout the year. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “I think that it’s a good class, but we never really finish projects we have started, which can get a little annoying. If we could follow through with projects we have started, it would be amazing.” (Grade 7)
- “I feel like I am learning interesting information, however, the design of the tests makes it so that I never have to memorize the information and that is a problem.” (Grade 9)
- “Less testing because tests don’t show kids’ abilities in the subject. It just shows if they can study or not.” (Grade 8)

TIME ON TASK

Students referred to the time teachers gave them to complete work or the time spent on particular content and skills. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “[Teacher name] is a good teacher. ... We get to build cool things and learn lots of exciting activities. ... We even have a week to complete our projects before going on to the next module (or project) so everyone would have a fair amount of time for their module.” (Grade 6)
- “She is an amazing teacher. She makes every day fun when I have her, but we could use some actual time to work on actual subjects, not just playing on the computer, and spend more time COOKING.” (Grade 8)
- “I think in class we should use time that we need to practice instead of wasting it.” (Grade 4)
- “I feel like we learn too much too fast. We get the worksheets one day and have part of class to finish them and that’s it. I wish there was more time to get things clarified or have more than one way of doing things or even just tricks to remember things.” (Grade 8)

REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES

Students referred to the ways in which their teachers brought in connections from outside of school to deepen understanding of and investment in a discipline or subject. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “[Teacher name] is a kooky, but great teacher and I absolutely love having her class! She makes it a fun learning process and gives us art skills we can use in everyday life. I couldn’t tell you how much I’ve benefited from her class. It helps with all kind of art and drawing. The day she retires will be a sad day.” (Grade 8)
- “Maybe try more hands-on activities. Try and connect calculus to the outside world, and explain why it is important for us to be learning it.” (Grade 11)
- “[Teacher name] is my favorite teacher. I am in his [specific course] and he tries his best to make the difficult material easy to understand by applying the knowledge to real life or other things that we have learned in the past.” (Grade 10)
- “[Teacher name] is a great teacher. She teaches us things that are relevant to real life, not just things that will help us in school.” (Grade 8)

DIFFERENTIATION

Students referred to the ways in which their teachers responded to students by providing different ways of accessing material and demonstrating mastery of content and skills. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “[Teacher name] is my favorite teacher. She’s really fun and makes learning very enjoyable. She is very funny and likes to do crafts and artistic things in class to help us learn in different ways.” (Grade 8)
- “He’s very flexible with the different ways people learn!” (Grade 11)
- “I understand that it’s difficult to plan when some students are more advanced than others, but I feel a lot of time is wasted for me waiting for other students to repeat what we have been working on for a while, five times every class.” (Grade 7)
- “Needs to interact and show how to learn Spanish in different ways, not just one way.” (Grade 9)

CRITICAL THINKING

Students referred to the ways that their teachers pushed them beyond memorizing material so they could come to and question bigger, more conceptual understandings. Following are representative responses that demonstrate this theme:

- “He is a really good teacher. ... He makes sure that we understand what we’re learning and that we learn the roots of what we’re learning, not just the facts and dates. He gets us to understand the origin of it all.” (Grade 11)
- “This teacher is very good! He really emphasizes the big picture of things and why and not just answers like dates, names, etc. He explains things well.” (Grade 10)
- “[Teacher name] is a very good teacher who makes you think about problems critically instead of just giving us the answers.” (Grade 10)
- “[Teacher name] has an amazing personality and is very nice and respects all of us, although she is not a very good teacher. She doesn’t really teach us the lessons and only makes us memorize the answers.” (Grade 8)

Conclusion: Student Expertise on Teacher Effectiveness

This analysis of the open-ended responses from the SPS finds that students' written perceptions of their schooling provide a rich and complex picture of life in their classrooms. Some of the responses were general in nature, but many students took the time to write specific comments, critique, praise, and suggestions for teachers that focused on their own learning. The majority of students who responded to the survey took it seriously and demonstrated their distinctive expertise on the nature of teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Student perception data is unique in that students spend more time with teachers than anyone else in the education system but are not often asked what they think about their teachers' practice. As this report illustrates, students have valuable perspectives that are useful in combination with other measures of teacher effectiveness, such as observations and test scores. Students can likely provide a more comprehensive view of their learning environment than an outside observer (such as a principal) who may come into a classroom only a handful of times during the year. Additionally, the SPS gathers data from a representative sample of a teacher's students, providing multiple viewpoints on one teacher. Perhaps the most illuminating outcome from the review of the open-ended responses, however, is the clarity and consistency with which students from all grades and types of classes commented on what was necessary for them to learn more effectively. These responses touched upon some of the most important measures of teacher effectiveness such as differentiation and the promotion of critical thinking. Test scores can show whether or not a student has mastered particular knowledge and skills, but the SPS can help us determine *why* students are or are not learning, and what is needed to help improve instruction.

These results demonstrate that students can identify effective teaching practices and are able to respond substantively to survey items about their educational experiences. Honoring students' voices not only helps educators deepen their knowledge of teaching practices and learning environments, but it also gives students a voice in the conversation about teacher effectiveness.