

# Asking Students about Teaching

Student Perception Surveys  
and Their Implementation



**No one has a bigger stake in teaching effectiveness than students.** Nor are there any better experts on how teaching is experienced by its intended beneficiaries. But only recently have many policymakers and practitioners come to recognize that—when asked the right questions, in the right ways—students can be an important source of information on the quality of teaching and the learning environment in individual classrooms.

## A New Focus on the Classroom

As states and districts reinvent how teachers are evaluated and provided feedback, an increasing number are including student perception surveys as part of the mix. In contrast to the kinds of school climate surveys that have been commonly used in many systems, these student perception surveys ask students about specific teachers and specific classrooms. District-wide administration of such surveys has begun in Denver, Memphis, and Pittsburgh. Statewide pilots have taken place in Georgia and North Carolina. And student surveys are now used for feedback and evaluation by the [New Teacher Center](#), [TNTP](#) (formerly The New Teacher Project), and such charter management organizations as [Aspire Public Schools](#) and [Green Dot Public Schools](#).

There are many reasons for this new interest. Teaching is a complex interaction among students, teachers, and content that no one tool can measure. The search for different-but-aligned instruments has led many to use student surveys as a complement to such other tools as classroom observations and measures of student achievement gains.

Analysis by the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project finds that teachers' student survey results are predictive of student achievement gains. Students know an effective classroom when they experience one. That survey results predict student learning also suggests surveys may provide outcome-related results in grades and subjects for which no standardized assessments of student learning are available.

Further, the MET project finds student surveys produce more consistent results than classroom observations or achievement gain measures (see the MET

project's [Gathering Feedback](#) policy and practitioner brief). Even a high-quality observation system entails at most a handful of classroom visits, while student surveys aggregate the impressions of many individuals who've spent many hours with a teacher.

Student surveys also can provide feedback for improvement. Teachers want to know if their students feel sufficiently challenged, engaged, and comfortable asking them for help. Whereas annual measures of student achievement gains provide little information for improvement (and generally too late to do much about it), student surveys can be administered early enough in the year to tell teachers where they need to focus so that their current students may benefit. As feedback tools, surveys can be powerful complements to other instruments. Surveys might suggest students' misunderstandings aren't being addressed; done well, observations can diagnose a teacher's specific attempts at clarification.

## Imperatives for Implementation

Benefits aside, student perception surveys present their own set of challenges and considerations to states and districts. Some of these relate to the survey instrument itself. Not every survey will produce meaningful information on teaching. Not to be confused with popularity contests, well-designed student perception surveys capture important aspects of instruction and the classroom environment. Rather than pose, “Do you like your teacher?” typical items might ask the extent to which students agree that, “I like the way the teacher treats me when I need help” and “If you don’t understand something, my teacher explains it another way.” Survey development is a sophisticated, data-driven process.

But even a good instrument, implemented poorly, will produce bad information. Attending to issues such as student confidentiality, sampling, and accuracy of reporting takes on greater urgency as

systems look toward including student surveys in their evaluation systems. The care with which systems must administer surveys in such contexts is akin to that required in the formal administration of standardized student assessments. Smooth administration and data integrity depend on piloting, clear protocols, trained coordinators, and quality-control checks.

Based on the experience of its partners and other leading school systems and organizations, the MET project suggests four overriding requirements of any system considering student surveys as part of formal feedback and evaluation for teachers:

1. **Measure what matters.** Good surveys focus on what teachers do and on the learning environment they create. Surveys should reflect the theory of instruction that defines expectations for teachers in a system. Teachers with better survey results should also have better outcomes on measures of student learning.

2. **Ensure accuracy.** Student responses should be honest and based on clear understanding of the survey items. Student confidentiality is a must. Accuracy also means that the right responses are attributed to the right teacher.
3. **Ensure reliability.** Teachers should have confidence that surveys can produce reasonably consistent results and that those results reflect what they generally do in their classrooms—not the idiosyncrasies of a particular group of students. Reliability requires adequate sampling and an adequate number of items—but without overtaxing students.
4. **Support improvement.** Measurement for measurement’s sake is wasted effort. Teachers should receive their results in a timely manner, understand what they mean, and have access to professional development resources that will help them target improvement in areas of need. Student surveys are as much about evaluating systems of support for teachers as they are about diagnosing the needs within particular classrooms.

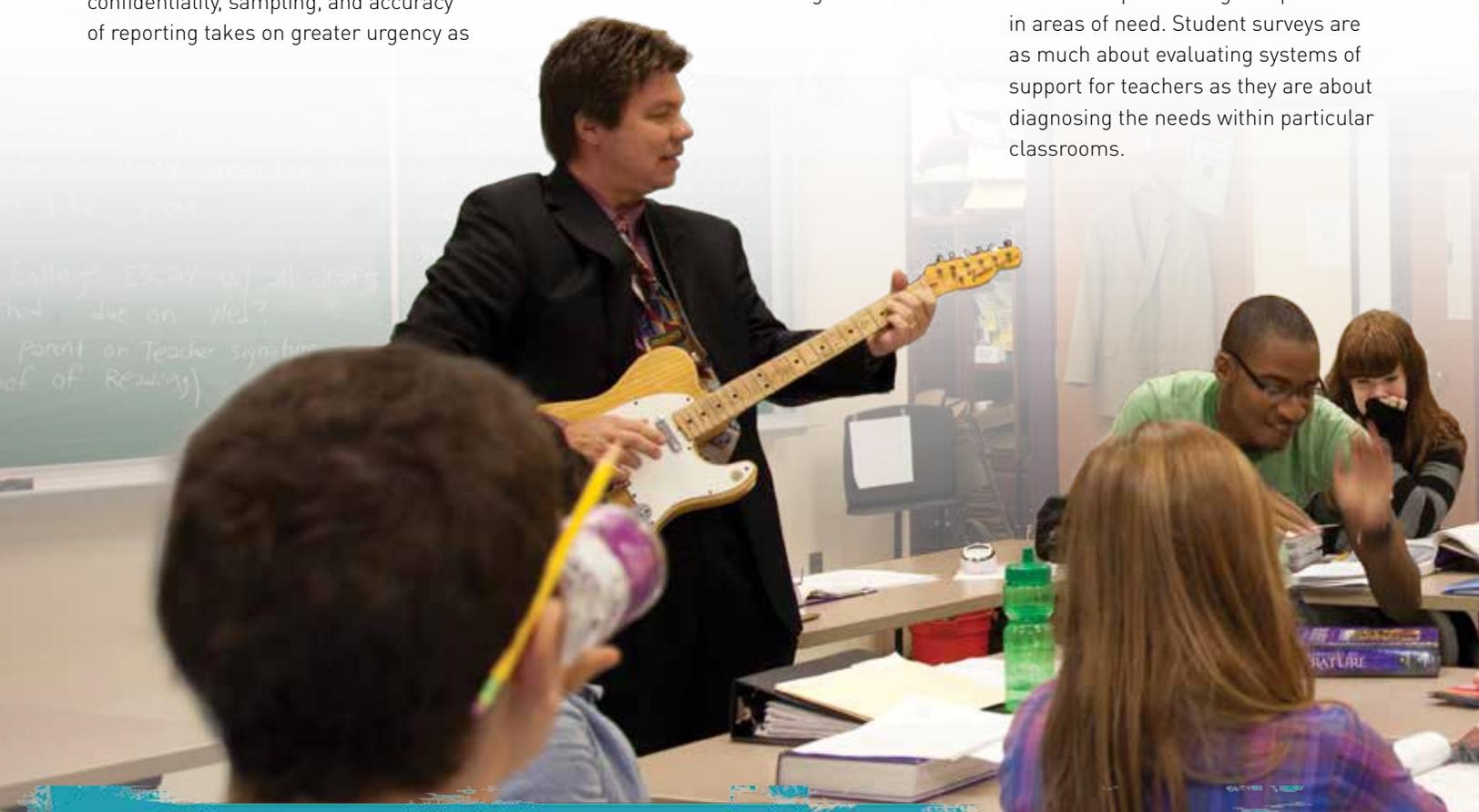
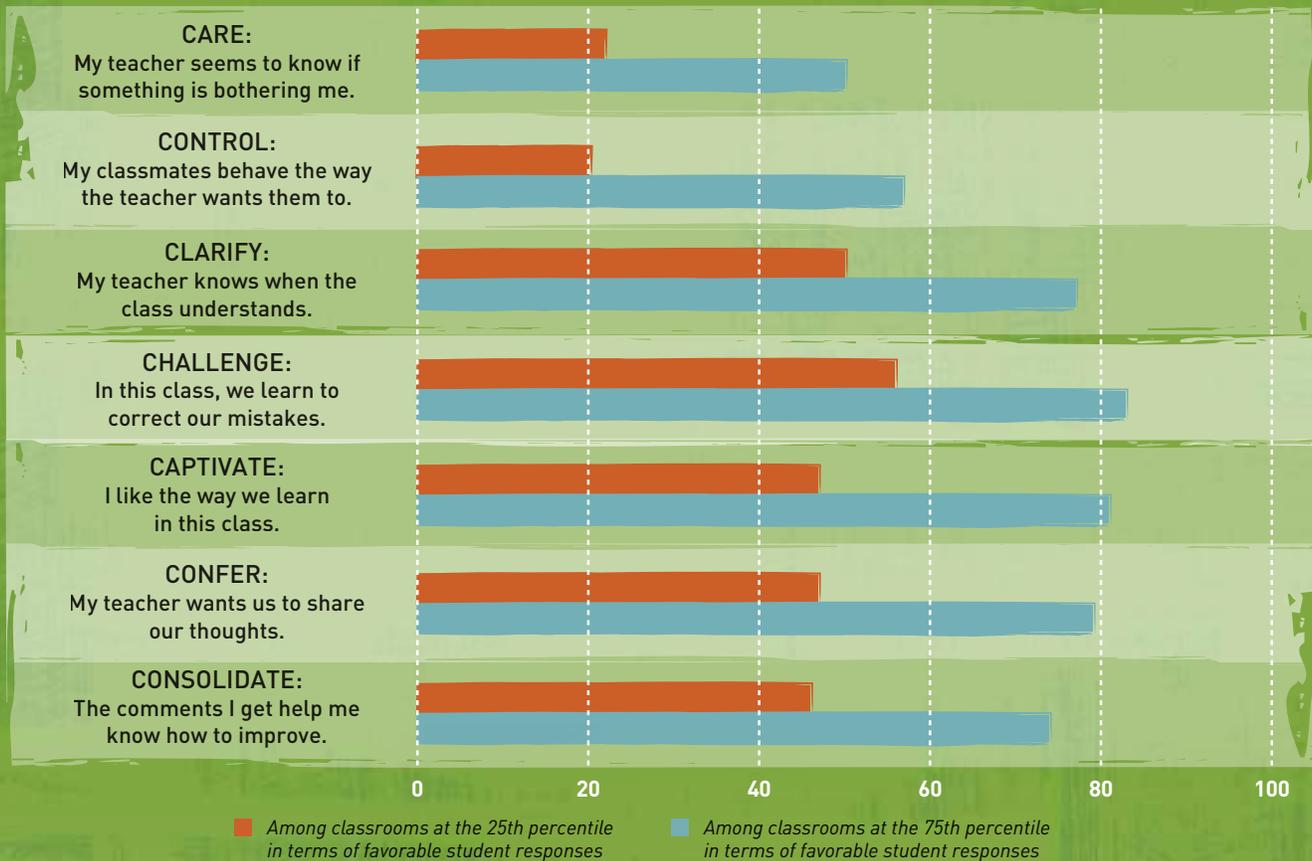


Figure 1

# Students Perceive Clear Differences among Teachers

Percentage of students agreeing with each statement



An important aspect of any measure of teaching is its ability to distinguish among classrooms. Measures that fail this test provide little information for feedback. The above chart shows the percentage of students agreeing with one statement from each of the Tripod student perception survey's constructs among classrooms ranked at the 75th and 25th percentiles in terms of how favorably their students responded. Clearly, the students were able to discern significant differences among classrooms in terms of the qualities measured by the survey.



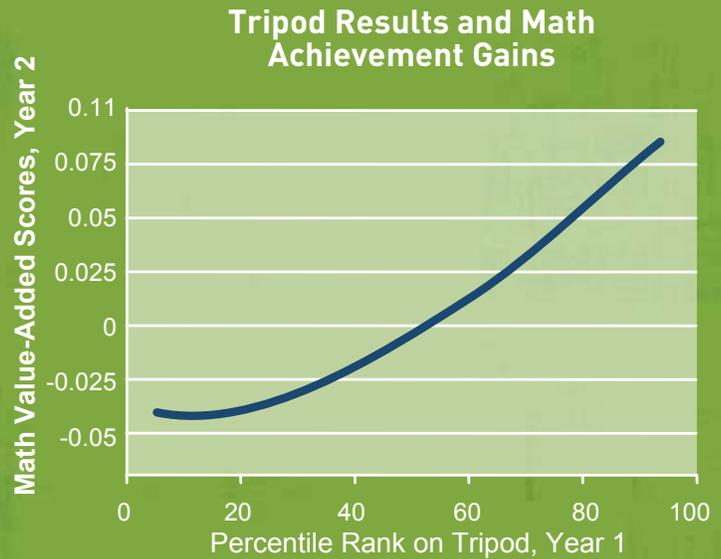
It will be important to monitor how student surveys behave as they move into the realm of formal evaluation. The Tripod survey studied by the MET project, developed by Harvard researcher Ronald Ferguson, has been refined over 11 years of administration in many thousands of classrooms as a research and professional development tool. But only recently have systems begun to consider its use as part of formal teacher evaluation.

Addressing these requirements amid finite resources and competing concerns necessarily involves trade-offs. Implementation in the field is a work in progress. Individual districts and states are piloting before deciding how to deploy surveys formally and at scale. Stakeholder engagement is vital for achieving positive results from these efforts.



Figure 2

## Teachers' Tripod Student Survey Results Predict Achievement Gains



The above slope represents the relationship between teachers' rankings based on Tripod student survey results from one year and their "value-added" scores—a measure of student achievement gains—from the following year. As shown, teachers with more favorable Tripod results had better value-added scores. Achievement gains here are based on state assessments.

### Stay tuned.

The findings discussed here represent but an update in the MET project's ongoing effort to support the work of states and districts engaged in reinventing the way teachers are evaluated and supported in their professional growth. Coming up: a report that explores the implications of assigning different weights to different components of a system based on multiple measures of effective teaching.

To download the full brief and research paper, plus other MET reports, go to [www.metproject.org](http://www.metproject.org).



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**About the MET project:** The MET project is a research partnership of academics, teachers, and education organizations committed to investigating better ways to identify and develop effective teaching. Funding is provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.