

6.3 Surveys—Don't Wait Until June

Try This

Why wait until the last week of school for thoughtful suggestions, surprising insights, heartening praise, and frank critiques in a survey? Do it now.

Create a student-friendly set of questions and get feedback while there's still time to make relevant adjustments—not to mention to bask in students' compliments when you need them the most, not when summer vacation is days away.

Make your surveys brief and ask for feedback that makes a difference. In other words, ask to hear the hard stuff. Those bits stand to impact your teaching in the most important ways.

Include questions that get to students' sense of safety, value, and fairness; their grasp of content; interest in the materials and assignments; and more. Some questions to use and adapt are:

- What is hard and what is easy about the class/content?
- When and how have you felt shut down or celebrated by the teacher or classmates?
- When and how do you feel your voice matters?
- Are assignments fair? Why or why not?
- What do you like about this class? What don't you like?
- What do I do that helps you understand what we're learning? What gets in the way of understanding?
- What else should I know?

Make sure to include a version of this question: "What else should I know?" Trust me, this helps you discover enlightening and surprising feedback.

Announce that these are for your eyes only, and that you will use their answers to help you be a more effective teacher. Anonymous surveys might elicit greater honesty, but they also prevent you from following up with specific students on what they need.

Model what a helpful answer looks like. But let it go when their answers aren't the work of a skilled diplomat. Read between the lines. "Pop quizzes suck," can be just that—who likes a pop quiz, especially if you're unprepared? But think deeper—are pop quizzes getting in the way of students wanting to be part of your class?

Don't read these at the end of a long day when a negative comment might be harder to hear. Put on your Teflon suit and remember students might not have much experience tactfully or clearly expressing their needs.

Look for repeated responses, not outliers. When students answer consistently regarding any concern or frustration, that's important. Start there for immediate impact.

Let students complete these in class, not as homework. Sit apart so they won't worry you are checking their answers. Thank them for their feedback.

After reading results and making a plan for adjustments to your class, explain that the changes are based on their feedback. *Let them know that you listened.* Remind them their voices are important to you and that they don't need to wait for the next survey to give you constructive feedback.

How do I know if this idea will help?

- You're struggling to connect with all of your students.
- Things aren't going smoothly, and you don't know why.
- There's been a shift in student energy, enthusiasm, or engagement.
- You find yourself trying new things all the time in an effort to "right the ship."
- When you ask questions in class like, "Does this make sense?" you get perfunctory answers.

How do I know if this idea is working?

- You have new insights into what students are thinking about the class and content.
- You plan according to what you now know about students and their needs.
- Students aren't waiting for the survey to give you helpful feedback—they come to you at lunch, after school, or communicate it otherwise.
- Students let you know their needs in constructive and clear ways, not by acting out.

Survey

Complete the survey below!

What adjectives would you use to describe how you feel in your favorite class?

Your answer _____

What adjectives would you use to describe how you feel in your least favorite class?

Your answer _____

What happens to make you feel engaged and interested in a classroom?

Your answer _____

Adapt for K-2

- Naming feelings and emotions can be hard at this age. Keep it very simple. Surveys should simply ask them to circle an emoji or number that corresponds to a statement.
- When you introduce the survey, keep it simple—say that you want to hear how they're feeling about school or in class so you can help them even more, and leave it at that.
- Adults are very much "in charge" at this age and that is a security to kids, not a threat to their autonomy. Explain that this check-in is just so you can learn what they need, not to open the class up to an overhaul—scary!

Adapt for 6-12

- Try this after assignments and units, especially when performance was not what you expected.
- Set the climate for a feedback-friendly classroom early on. Let students know that you welcome their thoughts. This will be an important step to establishing mutual respect.
- Always follow up after you've solicited feedback. Students need to know that you listened to it, even if you can't make changes to accommodate everyone.
- If students do approach you with feedback, remember the courage it took for them to come to you. Thank them for being brave.
- Don't get overly invested in outlier comments that are harsh. Remember that teens are often subject to cruel comments (and therefore often pass it on).

How to try this with others

- Create a survey together that makes sense for you and your kids. Review as you go—are you opening this up to hear the hard stuff, the stuff that will matter?
- More importantly, read the results together. This feels vulnerable, but it helps to have a buddy around. Highlight the positive comments and praise for your friend. Those are easy to dismiss. Be problem solvers together.
- Help your friend look for patterns. Repeated, consistent frustrations or concerns are the place to start.
- Set a goal together for what you will try in moving forward, based on this feedback.
- Make a date for when you will administer the survey again, and decide what specifically you hope to see changed.

Want to know more about this strategy and others like it?

Check out: Seeger, Chris. 2017. "Improve Your Teaching by Asking for Student Feedback." *Teaching Tolerance*.