



Using Staff Surveys to Measure Schools- Are Teacher Perceptions a Leading Indicator of School Success?

An overview of the research

It makes sense on its surface that happier employees perform their jobs better and staff that work together in a collaborative, positive adult culture will produce better outcomes. It stands to reason that this kind of positive, collaborative staff culture, once established, would lead to increasingly positive outputs. So what does the research say? Staff surveys are regularly used in other industries and frequently referred to by researchers as a “leading indicator.” In short- the research suggests that teacher perceptions have been found to be reliable leading indicators of school success. How are they used in other industries? What about education? What implications does this have for how districts and schools should shift practice?

An overview of staff survey research in other professions in the U.S. and abroad

Gallup discussed this trend in their report [How Employee Engagement Drives Growth](#). According to the report, using Q12, a largely survey based measure of employee engagement, is effective in predicting positive outcomes. “The research shows that the Q¹² is a business' best measurement tool for initiating company-wide transformation *to create sustainable growth*...Companies constantly evolve, and they need new ideas all the time. **Engaged employees are a lot closer to the best ideas**,” says Harter. “They're thinking about the whole company and how they fit into it, and **their ideas lead to better decisions**.”

Research from the UK also [draws a link](#) between employee engagement, measured by surveys, resulting company performance.

The Institute for Work and Health in Ontario Canada has an [Ontario Leading Indicators Project](#)- which measures leading indicators of occupational health and safety performance across many industries. The indicators come from a research-based survey and have been found to be a rigorous and valid predictor of organizational performance.

Okay, Okay...But What About Education?

While a less studied area until recently, nearly all of the available, rigorous research on the association between teacher working conditions and student achievement have found that teacher working conditions are in fact *predictive* of student achievement. A [quantitative study](#) released in 2009 by Helen Ladd of Duke University asked how predictive teacher’s perceptions of their working conditions (through surveys) was of desired policy-relevant outcomes. The study finds a positive relationship between teacher’s perceptions of their working conditions and professional development and student achievement as measured by test scores in both math and reading.



[A study by Kraft and Papay](#) at Brown University in 2014 found that in fact more supportive teacher working environments (as measured by teacher perception surveys, focusing on the Charlotte-Mecklenberg school district) resulted in substantially higher student growth. “On average, teachers working in schools at the 75th percentile of professional environment ratings improved 38% more than teachers in schools at the 25th percentile after ten years.”

Both of these studies used the [TELL survey](#) to measure teacher perceptions. The TELL survey covers the areas of teacher time, facilities and resources, community support and involvement, managing student conduct, teacher leadership, school leadership, professional development, instructional practice and support, overall, and new teacher support. Examples of teacher’s perception survey items that helped produce a leading indicator of school success include:

- Teachers have time to collaborate with colleagues
- Teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students
- Teachers have sufficient access to a broad range of professional support personnel
- Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues
- Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles
- The faculty and leadership have a shared vision
- There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in the school
- The school leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns
- As a beginning teacher, I have the supports I need to succeed

Another study in 2014 from [Ronald Ferguson and Eric Hirsch](#) with data from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project covering fourth and eighth grade results in math and reading. The study finds that teacher beliefs and professional behaviors do in fact predict teaching quality, student engagement as well as student achievement outcomes as measured by standardized test scores.

The Center for Youth Program Quality uses a validated instrument called the “[Leading Indicators for Quality Programs](#)” to effectively measure Out-Of-School-Time programs. Almost all elements of the research-based Leading Indicators evaluations are surveys of staff, youth and parents.

Finally, we know that improving professional adult culture is essential to school improvement. Jon Saphier of Research for Better Teaching, a renowned teaching expert who has worked with more than fifty districts to design professional growth systems, calls adult professional culture the “[sine qua none](#)” of school improvement. Essentially, without it, everything else falls apart. And this makes common sense, if adults aren’t invested, students won’t be. If adults frequently leave, schools waste enormous resources and the brain trust that helps to sustain focused school initiatives, not to mention the [enormous cost of teacher turnover](#). We also know that a [lack of professional voice](#) is a leading reason why teachers leave and that teacher departures have an especially [negative impact on urban students](#). So this is a problem worth solving.



Conclusions and Recommendations

Okay, so teacher perceptions and professional culture provide us an idea of whether student outcomes will likely improve...now what?

1. Given that the federal Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to evaluate schools using some form of a school report card, this research we present here has huge implications for how we should be evaluating and rating our schools. Parents expect that the measures we use to rate our schools reflect the best research on how to accurately capture school quality, yet research has found that more holistic school evaluations using multiple measures including a heavy reliance on stakeholder surveys actually *more accurately measure* how parents with students currently enrolled in those schools evaluate their own school.

Second, if our goal is to produce educational equity, we cannot ignore that no matter how we evaluate schools – evaluations and ratings have an effect on equity- the question is what kind of effect? We know that when we put “top-line” summative scores on schools like A to F or 1 to 5 stars, that actually exacerbates inequalities as [affluent parents use the data to self-segregate](#). So what’s the alternative? If we were to produce more holistic evaluations focusing on *leading indicators* (like staff, student, parent perception, teacher retention and more) rather than *lagging* indicators (like test scores), school evaluations could actually incentivize parents to invest in schools that are on the right track and getting better. That investment, in turn, will help those schools improve at an even faster rate. In other words- school evaluations produce school spirals- they either reinforce negative perceptions with inaccurate and limited, lagging data that lead to a downward spiral of disinvestment or they can reinforce good practices by looking at real-time progress and send the school on an upwards spiral of community investment and growth.

2. Given that research says that teacher perceptions of working conditions, professional culture and professional development are directly linked to increased student achievement, districts should be investing in teacher retention solutions, working to improve professional culture (especially the role of the school leader) and building evaluation systems that focus on teacher professional growth rather than narrow “accountability” goals. The good news is that there is so much we *can* do to directly work with schools to improve adult professional culture. EmpowerEd is pioneering work to [build relational trust](#) between teachers and school administrators, developing models for teacher leadership so teachers can [gain professional voice](#) both in school and in their district without leaving the classroom and ensuring that teachers help guide education policy because we know that decisions informed by the primary practitioners of education will be better decisions for all kids. Learn more about our work [here](#).



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