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Lessons from the Field:

THE ROLE OF STUDENT SURVEYS IN TEACHER EVALUATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Jeff Schulz, Gunjan Sud, and Becky Crowe

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS

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Bellwether Education Partners is a nonprofit dedicated to helping education organizations–in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors–become more effective in their work and achieve dramatic results, especially for high-need students. To do this, we provide a unique combination of exceptional thinking, talent, and hands-on strategic support.

INTRODUCTION

Across the country, states, districts, and charter management organizations are beginning to implement new teacher evaluation models to improve how teacher performance is measured—and ultimately to improve teacher and student performance. Researchers believe that this new generation of evaluation systems will not only better differentiate high-quality and low-quality teaching, but that the data generated will result in more personalized teacher support and professional development.

States and districts are taking various approaches to measuring teacher effectiveness. It is generally agreed that the most robust and fair evaluation systems utilize multiple measures of teacher performance and often include classroom observations, student achievement, and even student and parent input. While student surveys are not new, they typically have been used to take the temperature of the whole school (for example, school climate surveys) rather than focus on specific teachers.

TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS: TWO WAYS TO USE STUDENT SURVEYS

For teacher evaluation: Survey results contribute to a formal, summative evaluation. This requires alignment among different components of evaluation so teachers receive consistent messages about their performance.

For professional development: Survey results offer feedback that serves to inform practice. This requires aligning survey outcomes to coaching.

Some districts are using student surveys for just one of these purposes, while others are using them for both.

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But, because students are the direct consumers of instruction, with a unique perspective on teacher impact, there is a growing belief that students can provide valuable feedback on a teacher's performance in the classroom. Student perception surveys are increasingly seen as a low-cost and reliable tool for gathering data and feedback on the quality of teaching in individual classrooms.

Well-designed student surveys ask students about instructional practices that correlate with improved student learning, such as student-teacher relationships, teacher management of the classroom, rigor of lessons and student engagement, and teacher responsiveness to student struggle. The feedback provides actionable information about students' classroom experiences. Recent research has shown that student perception data are predictive of student achievement gains and in many cases are more reliable than classroom observations and student growth measures.

However, incorporating student surveys into formal, high-stakes teacher evaluation and development systems has its challenges. Survey users, survey providers, and education funders all have a role to play in ensuring that student feedback is meaningful and used to improve teaching and learning.

This paper seeks to highlight the experience of states, districts, charter management organizations, and teacher preparation programs that are "early adopters" of student perception surveys. We interviewed more than 40 thought leaders, state officials, and school leaders; reviewed state laws and regulations; and reviewed the research on teacher evaluation. We found that while there is great interest and potential to use student surveys to collect information on and improve teacher practices, few examples exist of field surveys being used successfully to benefit teacher and student experiences.

We highlight some specific challenges and offer advice on actions the various stakeholders can take to help ensure the value of student surveys as a tool for teacher development and support.

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS FROM THE TRIPOD PROJECT SURVEY
(STUDENT ASKED TO RESPOND YES OR NO)**

Elementary level: "In this class, we learn a lot almost every day."

Upper elementary level: "My teacher wants me to explain my answers—why I think what I think."

Secondary level: "My teacher takes the time to summarize what we learn each day."

BACKGROUND: FACTORS DRIVING THE USE OF STUDENT SURVEYS

To understand the growing interest in student perception surveys, it is important to consider more generally the recent push to improve teacher evaluation systems. In 2009, the nonprofit organization TNTP—formerly known as The New Teacher Project—published *The Widget Effect*, a seminal report highlighting the shortcomings of teacher evaluation systems. Looking at 12 evaluation systems in four states, it found that, "teacher effectiveness is largely ignored. Excellent teachers cannot be recognized or rewarded, chronically low-performing teachers languish, and the wide majority of teachers performing at moderate levels do not get the differentiated support and development they need to improve as professionals."[1] The TNTP report helped spark a critical, but contentious conversation among K-12 stakeholders about the importance of improving teacher evaluation and development systems.

The Widget Effect and other research on the field's lack of measurable teacher effectiveness outcomes sparked a federal effort to promote the development of new statewide teacher evaluation systems through the federally funded Race to the Top (RTTT) grant competition. Among other things, RTTT grants required states to develop systems that use multiple measures to evaluate teachers. Beyond the requirement to use student performance data, states were free to identify other accurate and reliable measures.

TERMS:

Reliability: A tool or method's ability to generate the same result on repeated use.

Validity: A tool or method's ability to accurately measure what it is intended to measure.

While *The Widget Effect* highlighted the need for new teacher evaluation systems and RTTT provided the incentive for states to redesign their systems using multiple measures, it was the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) study, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which had the most direct impact on the recent upswing in the adoption of student surveys. The three-year MET study evaluated the use of student surveys in seven different school districts and involved 3,000 teachers. The study concluded that collecting student perception data is an effective and reliable tool for measuring teacher effectiveness, and that "students know an effective classroom when they experience one."[2] In fact, surveys were found to be broadly predictive of a teacher's ability to increase student achievement and were a more reliable measure than classroom observations. Importantly, student surveys were also more stable year-to-year than student test scores, meaning student survey results showed promise as an additional measure in teacher evaluations to increase *reliability* and *validity*.

It should probably come as no surprise that asking students about their experiences with specific teachers in specific classrooms generates a very accurate picture of student learning in those classrooms. Students spend many hours with their teachers (as compared with evaluators who conduct brief classroom observations for multiple teachers). And surveys have the benefit of aggregating the impressions of many individuals.

STUDENT SURVEY PROVIDERS

The MET project studied the Tripod survey, which is one of the oldest and most widely used off-the-shelf survey instruments. Some states and districts have chosen to adopt Tripod wholesale; others chose to adapt Tripod items to fit local contexts. Major vendors also include iKnow My Class, My Student Survey, Panorama, and YouthTruth. The MET Project Policy and Practice Brief summarizes several vendor-provided student perception survey options and provides details on their designs.[3] In addition to the major vendors, research institutions—including institutes of higher education—also design surveys.

In response to the MET report's findings that student surveys are a reliable tool for differentiating between high-quality and low-quality teaching, more and more states and districts are choosing to use student perception surveys to gather data on teacher effectiveness.

STUDENT SURVEY USERS: THE EXPERIENCE OF EARLY ADOPTERS

While adoption remains somewhat limited at this point, there is a growing body of experience in administering student perception surveys and using feedback to inform teacher development and evaluation. Our analysis explored the use of student surveys by a variety of users, including states, districts, charter management organizations, and teacher preparation programs. We highlight each of these in turn:

STATES

States have the authority to set teacher effectiveness legislation and regulation. While some have chosen to mandate statewide teacher evaluation models, many others allow for locally developed teacher evaluation systems.

A recent report from the National Council on Teacher Quality, a research and policy group, notes that many states are incorporating surveys as an important source of data and feedback on teacher performance. Specifically, 17 states now require or allow for use of student, parent, or peer surveys in teacher evaluations. Twelve states require or allow for student surveys in particular.[4]

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FIGURE 1

USE OF STUDENT SURVEYS IN TEACHER EVALUATION
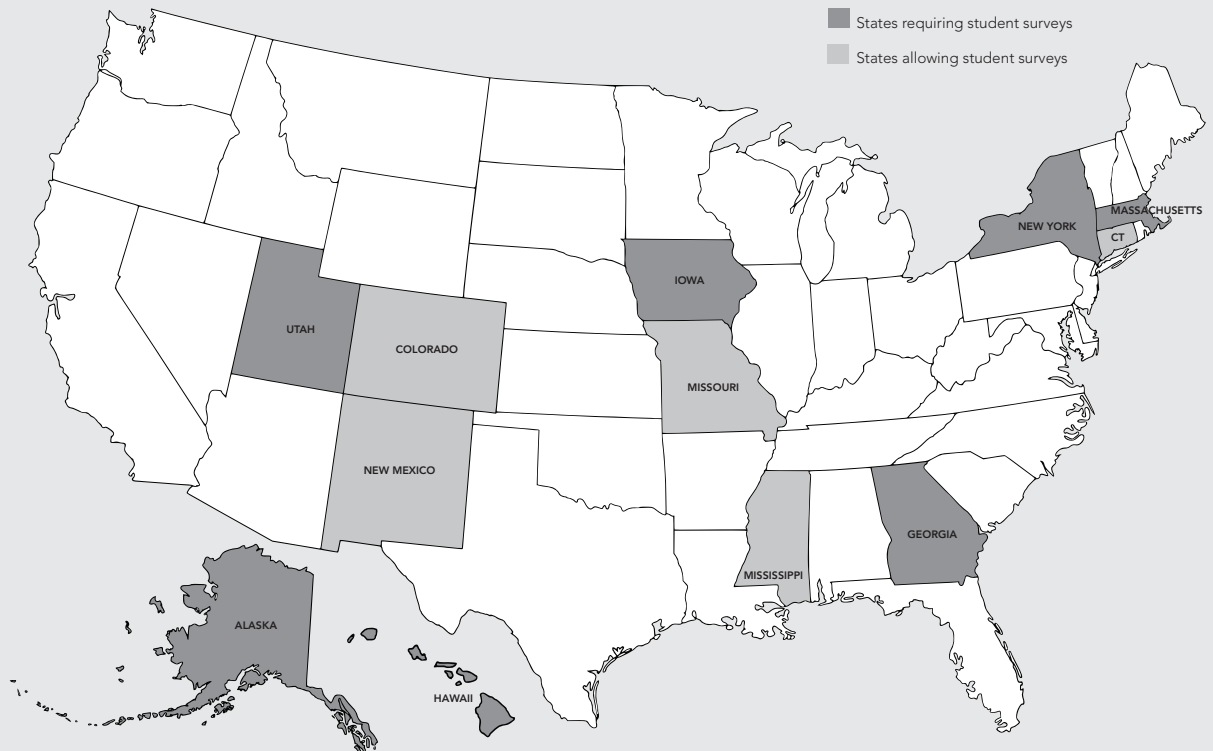
7 states requiring student surveys: Alaska, Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Massachusetts, New York, and Utah
5 states allowing student surveys: Colorado, Connecticut, Mississippi, Missouri, and New Mexico

Source: "State of the States 2013 Connect the Dots: Using Evaluations of Teacher Effectiveness to Inform Policy and Practice" (National Council on Teacher Quality, October 2013).

Each state is taking a slightly different approach to the use of student surveys. For example, in Georgia and Massachusetts, districts are given flexibility in how student surveys are incorporated into teacher evaluation models, with no predetermined weighting. In Hawaii, teacher professional practice (which accounts for 50 percent of the overall evaluation) is assessed using classroom observations and student surveys. The other 50 percent of the evaluation is based on student growth and learning.[5]

Other states have stopped short of mandating student surveys but allow them to be used as one measure of teacher effectiveness. For example, in Colorado, the use of student perception data is strongly encouraged in the state rules as a means to provide teachers with feedback on their performance. The Colorado Legacy Foundation recently piloted a student perception survey to determine its validity and reliability for use as one of the multiple measures of an educator's performance. Based on the results of that pilot, the Foundation has developed a full student survey tool kit.

DISTRICTS

Several large school districts have also either begun using—or plan to use—student surveys about their experiences in individual classrooms as a means to inform teacher evaluations and professional development.

As mentioned above, the MET study has been the single biggest driver in spurring adoption in these proactive districts. Through participation in the MET study, 3,000 teachers across seven large, urban districts—Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Dallas Independent Schools, Denver Public Schools, Hillsborough County (Fla.) Public Schools, Memphis Public Schools (now Shelby County Schools), New York City Schools, and Pittsburgh Public Schools— used student surveys as a trial evaluation and development tool. Since the original study results were published, four of the MET districts—Pittsburgh Public Schools, Denver Public Schools, Shelby County Schools, and New York City Schools—have begun administering surveys district-wide. Shelby County now counts student survey results as 5 percent of a teacher's overall evaluation. New York City will do the same beginning in 2014-15.

Adoption has not been limited only to large districts participating in the MET study. Other large districts including Chicago Public Schools, San Jose Unified School District, and Syracuse City School District are all planning to use student surveys as a component of teacher evaluations. The weight given to the surveys varies—for example, in Chicago it is 10 percent; in Syracuse it is 6 percent.

This is in addition to many more small and medium-size districts across the country, such as Lee County, Fla., and Austin, Texas, that are piloting or implementing surveys as a vehicle to provide developmental feedback to teachers.

CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

While charter management organizations (CMOs) are not facing the same policy mandates to implement new teacher evaluation models as are states and districts, several leading-edge CMOs either incorporate student surveys, or are considering their use, when evaluating their teachers. Among the more proactive charters are high-performing charter networks such as Green Dot, Achievement First, YES Prep, Uncommon, and Aspire. Each of these networks makes it a priority to develop and retain effective teachers and views student surveys as part of an integrated approach to accomplishing those objectives.

In the case of the CMOs, the decision to implement student surveys often begins as a "bottom up" process, with the teachers advocating for greater information and feedback on their classroom practice. This contrasts with the experience of large districts, where the decision is typically more "top down," with district leadership initiating the use of surveys.

Despite the fact that several high-performing CMOs have integrated student feedback into their teacher evaluation models, it is our impression that overall adoption amongst the broader population of CMOs is still limited. This could be attributed to a lack of coordinated information sharing among charter leaders, a pioneering orientation among charter schools to develop their own unique approaches, or a focus on other human capital challenges, such as compensation and career pathways.

TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Some teacher preparation programs are also "early adopters," collecting real-time student feedback to help teacher candidates hone and refine their instructional practices throughout their preparation and training period. Programs such as TNTP and Teach for America, for instance, are beginning to administer and use student surveys to give feedback to individual teachers and identify high-impact classroom practices. Yet even among the more innovative, alternative-route teacher preparation programs, overall adoption of student surveys appears to be slower than in districts and CMOs.

Our conversations with officials from a limited number of traditional university-based teacher preparation programs suggest that most are not yet using student surveys as formal components of training, although some programs are beginning to explore ways to collect student input as formative feedback to their teacher candidates.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY EARLY ADOPTERS

Our interviews, along with other published reports and articles,[6] suggest that the experience of early adopters has been generally positive, with surveys providing helpful information about how well teachers engage and motivate students to learn. But many of those we talked to cautioned that there are a number of implementation hurdles still ahead for both survey providers and survey users.

The MET survey identified some of the challenges that are important for consumers of student surveys to note. One is survey design—ensuring that the survey questions measure what matters and are able to differentiate among classrooms. The MET project studied the Tripod survey in particular. While the Tripod survey has been refined over more than a decade of use as a research and professional development tool, it has only recently become part of formal teacher evaluation systems. This shift to a "high stakes" tool may have implications that need to be carefully considered by various stakeholders. As the MET study itself notes, "Any instrument, when stakes are attached, could distort behavior in unwanted ways, or produce a less accurate picture of typical practice."[7]

"It is important for states and districts not to underestimate what it takes to design a high-quality instrument, and adopt validated instruments or get expert help writing, testing and implementing surveys."

NCTQ, "Connect the Dots," 2013, pg. v

Survey administration is also critical. Users need to carefully plan and oversee student confidentiality, sampling, and accuracy of reporting. While surveys can be incredibly valuable and reliable sources of feedback for teachers, survey questions must be well designed and administration well managed.

Through our interviews with early adopters, we identified additional challenges relevant to implementation.

CHALLENGE #1: GAINING TEACHER BUY-IN AND SUPPORT

Despite the strong research findings from the MET study—and generally positive reaction from those administering surveys—teachers often express initial skepticism and resistance. This is especially true when the survey responses are being used as part of new teacher evaluation formulas, with implications for employment and compensation. Several times during our interviews, we were told that teachers view surveys as simply "popularity contests." Many fear that teachers who hold students to high standards and expectations might not be as well liked. This is an understandable reaction given the lack of familiarity with survey questions and rating mechanisms.

And, in fact, teacher resistance to using student feedback in formal evaluations has caused issues in some states and districts. Georgia, for example, originally planned to require student surveys to count as 10 percent of a teacher evaluation. But after the pilot, state leaders removed the percentage weight requirement. Georgia districts are now allowed to decide how to incorporate survey results in teacher evaluations. Teachers in Connecticut also raised some difficult questions when the state proposed including survey results in their educator effectiveness model, such as: "Are surveys 'benchmarked' so that teachers have clear performance expectations?" "What does a measurable goal for improvement look like?" and "What constitutes meaningful movement from initial survey administration in the fall to later administration in the spring?" Connecticut leaders struggled to respond to these questions and therefore determined that student surveys would be an optional, rather than required, component of teacher evaluation.

These early-implementer examples highlight the need to build stakeholder buy-in and support for student surveys from the beginning. Before piloting, administrators need to communicate clearly and regularly with teachers and students about what the surveys will ask (and why), how the questions were developed, and how the results will be used. Then, as surveys are piloted, users will be looking for "proof points" to show that student perceptions are predictive of student achievement and do in fact correlate with other teacher effectiveness measures. These additional data points will help allay teacher fears and build support for making student feedback an element of high-stakes evaluations.

In our interviews, we consistently heard that even initially reluctant teachers became proponents of student surveys after their implementation due to the value and perceived accuracy of the feedback. In general, teachers find the data useful in helping them understand their performance and how it relates to the performance of students. The National Education Association (NEA) has come out in support of student surveys as one of multiple evaluation indicators that can provide teachers with clear and actionable feedback to enhance their practice.[8]

There is general public support for the use of student surveys in educator evaluation models. A recent national survey of parents of children enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade found that 41 percent of those surveyed believed that student input should count "a great deal/quite a bit" in evaluating a teacher's performance, while 34 percent believed it should count "a moderate amount," and 24 percent believed "only a little/not at all."[9]

CHALLENGE #2: USING DATA TO IMPROVE TEACHER PRACTICES

The greatest and most complicated implementation challenge, of course, is not just collecting student feedback, but making use of it to boost teacher practice and student learning outcomes. Given that research has found student surveys to be a reliable and accurate indicator of teacher effectiveness, the next step is for states and districts to integrate that data into high-quality professional development to help all teachers grow throughout their careers.

One of the benefits of student surveys is that they generate a quick snapshot of student impressions. Survey data collected early in the school year could easily be used for coaching and in mid-year teacher evaluation conferences. Making the move from standardized professional development sessions to "in the moment" support has the potential to greatly improve teacher effectiveness.

We were unable to identify any state or district user that at this point has effectively integrated student survey feedback into the development of actionable support. Nevertheless, users were clear in saying that in the early phases of student survey rollout, it is important to plan ahead and think about when surveys will be administered, how the data will be shared with teachers, and how the results will eventually be used to create personalized support for teachers. It may be that in year one, the focus is ensuring smooth administration and building buy-in by only sharing individual results with teachers. In year two, the results could be shared with the principal and coaches with an emphasis on incorporating the survey results into professional development plans.

The Tripod PD Research Project under way in Shelby County Schools and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is exploring how student survey results combined with videos of teachers in action can provide valuable data for coaches to analyze instruction and create plans for implementing new practices in the classroom. To evaluate the support's effectiveness, the project is using a randomized design to compare teachers who receive coaching with those who do not, in terms of student achievement gains and changes in their Tripod results.[10]

As these new systems are tested and gain traction, both the providers and the users of surveys need to think through how to most effectively disseminate and respond to student feedback. This may require vendors to shift from acting as "product providers" to "solution providers" and may therefore require new capabilities and personnel. Districts and states will need to commit to, and invest in, using the results for teacher development and support and devising clear action plans for integrating the data into their teacher learning communities, coaching cycles, and other professional development opportunities. Making connections between survey administration and improved teacher effectiveness is critical.

RECOMMENDED STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS IN RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES

Each of the major stakeholder groups has a role to play to ensure that student surveys produce valuable results for teachers and students.

SURVEY USERS

States

• Avoid dictating one-size-fits-all solutions for how districts should include/use surveys in their teacher evaluation models.

• Monitor early-adopter states and districts to understand the benefits and drawbacks of using student surveys.

• Support pilot programs to accelerate the state of knowledge about the use of student surveys and support districts that want to incorporate surveys.

• Encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing among districts that implement student surveys and integrate that information into state policy decisions.

Districts and CMOs

- Engage teachers early in the process of deciding whether to use a student survey to help them better understand the value of student feedback.

- Explore student survey options and specific product features by talking to experts in the field and early adopters and reading published reports.

- Talk to multiple vendors and be informed about how to assess vendor offerings.

- Make sure that survey data are used as part of the professional development process (e.g., embed data in teacher learning communities, coaching cycles, and other on-site professional development) and not just as an evaluative measure.

SURVEY PROVIDERS AND FUNDERS

Vendors

- Develop more validated survey questions beyond those studied as part of the MET project.

- Continue to improve offerings, especially around connecting survey results to professional development and improved teacher effectiveness.

- Continue to develop functionality to link to technology platforms as a way to increase ease of use and the likelihood that outcomes will be used as part of broader teacher effectiveness initiatives.

Funders

- Fund research of student survey use in high-stakes environments.

- Encourage competition by funding multiple vendors as a way to lead to product improvement.

- Create channels for stakeholders to share best practices, lessons learned, and vendor information.

- Fund vendor/district/professional development provider collaborations to create tighter links between survey items and follow-up professional development.

CONCLUSION

Both interest in, and adoption of, student surveys has increased significantly since *The Widget Effect* was published five years ago. Student surveys are now integrated in state, district, and CMO teacher evaluation systems across the country, and some teacher preparation programs are also beginning to consider their use. The jury is still out, however, on whether student surveys will join classroom observations and student achievement data as a third common measure in newly redesigned teacher evaluation systems, or if adoption will remain limited to a small number of progressive districts and CMOs.

Based on our research and interviews, we believe that student surveys can be that third measure, because they add value that classroom observations and student learning data cannot. Unlike value-added data, student survey data provide actionable feedback that teachers and their supervisors can use to target specific areas for improvement.

Compared with classroom observations, student surveys are also a relatively cheap way to enhance the reliability and amount of information that evaluations provide. Put simply, adding student surveys to the two other widely used evaluation components generates a more reliable, robust, and actionable measure of teacher effectiveness at a relatively low cost.

The success of student surveys will ultimately depend on how well districts can realize their potential benefits. This will depend, in turn, on the quality of the surveys available, the ease with which schools can use them, and how the results are shared and integrated into existing professional development systems. Based on the experience of "early adopter" states, districts, and CMOs, maximizing the value of student surveys requires commitment from all stakeholder groups to continuously gather new data, refine models, and communicate best practices. Though hurdles do exist, conditions for success appear to be coming together: District and CMO adoption continues to increase. Multiple vendors continue to refine and improve their products and services as they compete for market opportunities. Interest from investors and consumers also continues to grow. Collectively, these trends suggest a potential for student surveys to play a significant and growing role in the future of educator evaluation.

ENDNOTES

1   Weisberg, Daniel, et al., *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (The New Teacher Project, 2009), pg. 6.

2   *Asking Students about Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation.* MET Project Policy and Practice Brief (The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, September 2012), pg. 2.

3   *Asking Students about Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation*, pg. 7-8.

4   "State of the States 2013 Connect the Dots: Using Evaluations of Teacher Effectiveness to Inform Policy and Practice" (National Council on Teacher Quality, October 2013), pg. 31.

5   Hawaii Educator Effectiveness System: Manual for Evaluators and Participants (Hawaii Department of Education, Office of Human Resources, Performance Management Section, July 2013). See: http://eesteacher.weebly.com/uploads/1/4/0/3/14039000/ees_manual_v1_3_online.pdf.

6   For example: "Leap Year: Assessing and Supporting Effective First-Year Teachers" (TNTP, 2013).

7   *Asking Students about Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation,* pg. 4.

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9   National Education Survey. The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, Interview dates: June 21-July 22, 2013, pg. 23. http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Parent%20Attitudes/AP-NORC%20National%20Education%20Survey%20Topline_FINAL.pdf. Accessed December 3, 2013.

10   *Asking Students about Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation*, pg. 20.