

THE MY VOICE™ SURVEY: QUALITATIVELY ASSESSING THE IMPACT IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the impact of the My Voice Survey on staff and students in the state of New Hampshire. The My Voice Survey assesses students' perceptions of their school experiences. The survey data informs schools about student aspirations, which are a key factor related to academic success. Students who have high aspirations push themselves to do better academically in order to achieve their dreams. Data was collected through narrative responses and interviews with principals, teachers, and the Deputy Commissioner of Education for New Hampshire. Numerous positive outcomes were perceived as being directly related to the use of the survey and the associated Aspirations framework.

BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2006, the New Hampshire Department of Education, under the leadership of Commissioner of Education Lyonel Tracy, undertook the Follow the Child initiative. Follow the Child is a personalized education plan that “helps New Hampshire students learn today, graduate tomorrow, and prepare for the future by supporting their personal, social, physical, and academic growth” (www.ed.state.nh.us). Schools involved in this initiative are committed to, among other things: personalizing education for each child, knowing each child as an individual, helping each student reach his or her fullest potential, and raising student aspirations.

All schools in the state of New Hampshire were offered the opportunity to administer the My Voice Survey to students and to participate in follow-up workshops facilitated by The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations. During the workshops, schools received assistance analyzing their My Voice Survey results and developing action plans to foster Self-Worth, Active Engagement, and a sense of Purpose for all students.

To assess the impact of the My Voice Survey, a qualitative study was completed. Principals and teachers responded to a series of prompts related to the impact the My Voice Survey had on staff and students. Particular emphasis was placed on how the survey results impact academic achievement. The study included a semi-structured interview with the Deputy Commissioner of Education and follow-up interviews with participating principals.

DATA SUMMARY

The My Voice Survey was perceived by all participants as complementing traditional forms of academic assessment, noting that the survey provides data necessary to create an optimal learning environment for all students. Three consistent themes emerged from the data:

1. Listening to student voice and connecting with students motivates the students to meet higher academic challenges.
2. Focusing on the My Voice Survey results and the Aspirations framework builds a school culture that enables students to perform well academically.
3. Understanding students' perspectives allows staff to personalize learning experiences for students and ultimately better meet each student's needs.

DATA ANALYSIS

1. *Listening to student voice and connecting with students motivates students to meet higher academic challenges.*

All the principals in this study expressed that “The results of the My Voice Survey had a tremendous impact on our school” (personal communication, high school principal, 1/14/09). Principals and teachers shared that the survey pushed the entire staff to listen to and connect with students. The New Hampshire survey results were similar to the national My Voice Survey results in that only 44% of students agreed with the statement, “Teachers care about my problems and feelings.” After the survey results were analyzed and discussed, teachers made it a priority to connect with students and understand each student as an individual. These personal connections motivated students to “strive to meet the academic challenges presented to them” (personal communication, high school teacher, 1/15/09). Teachers and principals attributed improved student performance with the increased focus on personal connections.

Another result of teachers connecting more deeply with students was a “real difference in the number of students participating in school-wide events” (personal communication, high school teacher, 1/21/09). Participating and being present in school affects students' academic performance. Teachers noted that the more students feel connected to school, the more effort they will put forth toward academics. “The survey results help support what we as teachers know from other research. It is well known that children who feel connected and have a purpose at their school will usually strive academically to meet the challenges presented” (personal communication, high school teacher, 1/15/09). The Deputy Commissioner, Mary Heath, added, “Assessment scores are significantly better when teachers interact differently. A stronger connection with the school is a great reason for students to achieve at higher levels” (personal communication, 2/3/09).

The Deputy Commissioner, principals, and teachers in New Hampshire noted that the survey heightened their awareness for the need to connect with and truly know their students. “I have made an effort to really focus on sense of Belonging since the survey” (personal communication, high school teacher, 2/3/09). These consistent staff actions resulted in students feeling their teachers care about them and want them to succeed.

2. Focusing on the My Voice Survey results and the Aspirations framework builds a school culture that enables students to perform well academically.

The survey results led to “a different way of thinking and acting” (personal communication, Deputy Commissioner, 2/3/09). The survey inspired teachers to see students as full partners in their educational journey. Principals and teachers expressed that the survey results caused them to reevaluate the importance of the individual student and student voice. “For students in New Hampshire, when they are heard and feel like they belong, their self-esteem increases. They become more actively engaged and there is a direct correlation with improved academic performance” (personal communication, Deputy Commissioner, 2/3/09). One principal shared that as a result of the My Voice Survey and the subsequent actions taken within the school, “Our school was the only school in the region to continually meet AYP status.”

As connecting with students took a higher priority, one principal noted, “There was a dramatic decrease in out of school suspensions” (personal communication, high school principal, 1/21/09). This led the principal to conclude that focusing on the Self-Worth Conditions creates an environment where students want to be in school. The more time students are in school, the more opportunity they have to learn.

The Deputy Commissioner of Education expressed, “The My Voice Survey helps build a school culture which values the whole child. This type of survey is a critical aspect of assessment. As we collect information about schools, it is imperative that educators include this type of assessment” (personal communication, 2/3/09). As a result of the survey and Aspirations framework, a school culture is developed which connects staff with students, values students as individuals, and understands the need to educate the whole child. All participants in this study shared in their agreement that an aspirations driven school culture is more conducive to teaching and learning.

3. *Understanding students' perspectives allows staff to personalize learning experiences and ultimately better meet each student's needs.*

Many attitudes and programs were changed in schools as a result of the My Voice Survey. Schools infused the 8 Conditions framework into ninth grade transition programs, mentoring programs, discipline procedures, recognition ceremonies, staff development, postsecondary advising, and teaching strategies. One principal stated, "The survey results were the bar by which all actions were based upon and thus measured. The results led us to create task forces around social, emotional, and academic needs" (personal communication, 1/15/09). An assistant principal noted that he "used the data as an initial step to understand the student body. This led to focusing on following each child with an informal program of identifying student needs" (personal communication 1/15/09).

As New Hampshire looks at redesigning its high schools, it becomes clear "that the very reasons why we need to redesign our high schools are evident in the responses to the My Voice Survey" (personal communication, Deputy Commissioner, 2/3/09). The My Voice national survey results indicate that students do not feel connected to adults, school is not relevant, and students have few decision-making opportunities at school. A redesigned high school needs to consider the school experiences of students. This New Hampshire Aspirations work has shown educators that listening to student voice and fostering connections with students affects their academic performance.

IMPLICATIONS

This multiple-case study portrays the significance of the My Voice Survey results and the associated Aspirations framework in fostering higher academic achievement levels. One principal concluded, "The My Voice Survey is a powerful tool for change" (personal communication, 2/17/09). The indications are that My Voice Surveys not only help to inform schools, but to transform them as well. Schools that aspire to create learning environments where all students strive to reach high academic standards are advised to listen to and involve students in creating a learning environment that motivates students. The result will be higher levels of academic achievement.