Safe and Supportive Schools
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Increasing Staff and Family Survey Response Rates

WEBINAR QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

On January 18 and 19, 2012, the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center hosted a Webinar titled "Increasing Staff and Family Survey Response Rates." During the session, the presenters, Eric Hirsch, Chief Officer, External Affairs for the New Teacher Center; Trina Osher, President of Huff Osher Consulting, Inc.; and Dr. Sarah Lindstrom Johnson, Assistant Director for Research and Evaluation of the Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools project and Research Associate at Johns Hopkins University, received several questions from the audience. Since the presenters could not answer all of the questions during the event, the Center has prepared the following Webinar Question and Answer Summary with responses to each question. For additional information, please email or call the Center (sssta@air.org; 1-800-258-8413).

Please note the content of this summary was prepared under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students to the American Institutes for Research (AIR). This Q/A summary does not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does it imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.

Q1. How long did it take you to see a response rate increase to a reasonable percent? And what, in your experience, is a reasonable response rate?

> **Eric Hirsch:** "Reasonable" is a great way to put it because there are some statistical considerations as to whether or not your response rate is sufficiently representative. So we look for response bias in our full population surveys to see if the folks we heard from look like the folks we didn't. But remember that our survey is anonymous, so we don't know who within an individual school took it. So what we do, and what a lot of other groups that conduct surveys do, is basically create a bottom floor for the response rate. What we've used is 50%; if we don't hear from a majority of the faculty in the building, we will not release that data back to the school. We'll still utilize it in our analyses and general aggregate data, but we won't include the individual school in analyses of schools relative to student achievement, etc.

> In getting a high response rate, I think the more you do a survey, you have the chance to go up and you have the chance to go down. And by the way, that's happened in states where we've implemented the survey multiple times. We first did the survey in North Carolina in 2002 and got a 34% response rate. The next time 38%, the next time we got a 67% response rate, the next time 87%, and the next time 89%. Because the state actually utilized the data to make changes and started to integrate the findings into school improvement planning and other policies. Had nothing been done with the data, as unfortunately it's happened in a few of our state clients, we've actually seen response rates decline from our first survey where there was excitement to them saying, "I took this two years ago and nothing happened."

So again, I think longitudinally it helps over time to build the response rate but you have to have evidence of utilizing the data and change or, in fact, it'll go down because they'll say, "Why am I giving you 22 minutes when nothing's happened…"

Q2. We don't have enough funds to develop a fancy system like you've shown. What other kinds of tools can be used to share results that as you described?

Eric Hirsch: It doesn't have to be too fancy, and there is a lot of survey software that can be used. We use something called Snap, and we've done a lot of programming and customization as you can see, but even something as simple as Survey Monkey can be used. Just doing something where you know the data will be arrayed in such a way that educators can utilize it is going to be really important. It's less about bells and whistles and more about making sure you're giving the information back to educators in a way that respects their anonymity and that they can pick it up and utilize it efficiently and effectively. Because we know that a lot of times what's going to happen in one or two faculty meetings is that you'll have some make it or break it moments. And making sure that that data is there in such a way that it can be drilled down quickly to identify an area or two around context to focus on for school improvement planning is what's important. So I only gave you ours as an example.

There is other off the shelf software that you can use, and in general, you can even use it without the software. But get it to people in a timely fashion and in a way that they can utilize it during a consistent chunk of time like a faculty meeting; this will make staff really see the data, and as a result, utilize it or at least start to traverse the data and get used to using it.

We've also found that taking this data and putting it on a dashboard with other pieces of data around human capital and around student learning can also facilitate the data use, and that would be really easy for a district or state to do. Just put the percentage that agree or strongly agree collectively and put it with a whole host of other data sources. That's a way that makes it really easy for the schools to use and that's what's going to bolster response rate— because the staff are going to see that this data matters to you because you've taken the time to present it to them and they'll realize the importance of this information to you, specifically, and to the school at large. The next time the survey rolls around, you're going to have to hold them back from taking it. They're going to ask when it's coming.

Q3. Is there a place that one can view the questions that the Maryland S3 asked the parents and staff (the survey items)?

Sarah Lindstrom Johnson: Maryland is currently developing a process to provide the survey to interested individuals. In the meantime if you would like a copy of the MDS3 Survey please email me at slj@jhmi.edu.

Greta Colombi: Also, the Safe and Supportive School's web site has a list of OSHS-approved school climate batteries; check the school climate measurement area for this list: http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=133.

Eric Hirsch: If you want to see a good example of our core constructs in those nine areas, we have conducted the survey in Maryland; and maybe you need to look at Sarah's piece with ours and that is at www.tellmaryland.org where you can preview the survey.

Q4. How do you calculate the response rate?

Eric Hirsch: First of all, I want to be clear that we do a full population survey. There are two ways you can survey. You could do a sample, and you see that all the time in Presidential polls, in which you're trying to survey a small group of people and extrapolate from their view about how the world may think. With that, you're really looking at sampling area and you see that plus or minus 4% confidence interval, etc. We do something different. We say, "I'm going to ask all staff." So the first thing you need to do is make sure you know who you're surveying and how many school-based, licensed educators are in every school, which is the group we're surveying.

That's not as easy as it sounds. Again, there are itinerant teachers. Do you count support personnel? Be clear. So getting that headcount is critical. And then we create anonymous login codes that are disseminated by letter. And we have a live response rate tracker so we can start to see what percentage of educators have responded. During the survey, we don't know who filled it out, but we know how many of those educators have. And we set that cut score before the survey, not at the end, to say, "You're not going to get this data back if you don't get a 50% rate or greater. Your voice is still heard in the district and state aggregate results." But then we are able to track.

So you must define your staff. You must define who you're surveying. You must get that number, and then you can look and track the number of surveys completed relative to that number. But getting to that number isn't easy, and as hard as it is for staff, it's even harder for families.

Q5. How do you gather results if you don't use e-mail links or logins?

Eric Hirsch: We use online survey software. (And again, doing the survey online is usually more efficient and you don't need to worry about data entry.) However, doing the survey online raises those issues of anonymity. And there is sometimes, depending on your district and school and internet connections, a technical hurdle to get over. But as long as we know the number of educators in a school, we then have them take the survey and that already has the data in our system.

But you can do that with a paper survey, too. You just have to figure in issues around scanning, data entry, etc. And teachers love to take this survey by paper. It's easier to administer at a staff meeting. But the more educators you survey, the harder it is. And remember, we're talking about climate. If staff do not feel comfortable with some of these issues at a faculty meeting, it's going to be hard to expect them to be honest in a paper-pencil venue within the school. So having it online allows them we have a three- to five-week survey window. It allows them to take this survey any time from any Internet computer. And that would be really helpful for you no matter what survey or what software you use.

Q6. Our districts will be administering staff surveys. Is e-mail a viable option for them? They will also administer paper and Scantron forms? Will this affect anonymity?

> **Eric Hirsch:** Jeopardizing anonymity depends on your survey software. If you e-mail a link to a survey or unique identifier to them, frankly, you know who it is. Now I know that all of you in the district have far more pressing things to do than to look through reams of data lines to see ones and zeros and who filled out what. But again, remember, we're really trying to not only promise anonymity and be true to it, but create that *perception*. And what we've found is that e-mail is great in promoting the survey and encouraging people to go to the survey portal. But if you use e-mail as your way to disseminate the survey, your educators are going to say, "They're going to know who I am," which is why we actually go through the expense of running off a piece of paper, bundling that piece of paper by school, having specific instructions, etc. so we don't have to go to e-mail. And we think that has been one of the keys of getting a high response rate.

> The second thing is to get a partner. So if you are utilizing email for the surveys at the school or the district level, I encourage you to make this a labor-management joint initiative. The staff trust the associations that they're members of, and either way, having them sign up is going to be very important. So if the associations are saying, "Hey don't worry about e-mails; it's okay; we really know we'll be anonymous," that will help with those perceptions.

Q7. My school is made up of very diverse population that speaks a number of languages. How best can I engage them to figure out which are interested in having the survey in English versus their native language?

> **Trina Osher:** Responses given in the family's primary language are more likely to accurately reflect what they know and think. The best strategy is to offer your information and survey materials in a multi-lingual format. You can promote confidence and avoid embarrassing people by making all options available in a single document allowing them the opportunity to confidentially choose the language they want to use There are some families with limited English capacity, when asked directly, will request the English version to "save face" and avoid appearing illiterate in English. Language is a complex skill. I also would suggest that consulting with cultural guides would be very helpful here. Parents and respected leaders in the community who really know what the language capacities are and understand the language preferences of families in the neighborhoods should be able to give you guidance on the most culturally appropriate ways to address language issues.

Q8. Do you have any advice on non-threatening, productive ways that principals or school district administrators can share and discuss staff's survey results with staff?

> **Sarah Lindstrom Johnson:** In the current education environment where everything is really about data, I don't think that staff perceive the data as threatening. I think one of the keys is ensuring a high response rate so you know that your data is valid. Eric has a cutoff of 50%; we're still working on that number for our survey, but we do advise administrators to take into account how many staff did answer the survey.

And then the second thing is that it has to be a constructive activity with an end goal. So just showing results on the screen and saying, "This is what we have; we need to improve it," is one thing. At least you're sharing the data people are looking at it. But then there need to be actionable activities, such as using the data to inform decisions around school climate improvement.

Eric Hirsch: We've actually found that these conversations are amazingly threatening; you can anticipate which schools will be threatened just by looking at the results. And I think we've tried to put tools out there for schools to utilize to create and help build that safe environment. So a couple of things I would add are to be clear on purpose, as Sarah said. Make sure they understand that this is formative data. If an individual is going to be held accountable in a summative way, that's a different conversation. If you have that statement of purpose, they understand that the data is part of school improvement planning and they as a collective need to understand how this will be used.

Secondly, you need to think about support. Again, not every school has the same capacity. The district helping a school may not help the trust issue; there should be an external evaluator, peer, community member, etc. helping digest this data. We must be careful to make sure the school doesn't feel like they're airing their dirty laundry in front of outsiders.

And finally, I think you need to think about who should lead that conversation. As I said earlier, where you sit shapes how you view the world. Principals on every survey we've given have had a statistically significant different answer from teachers on every question of every survey and they've been more positive about the results. That doesn't mean anybody is wrong or right. But it means thinking that principals who do not often share the same perceptions that the faculty should be the ones leading the conversation may not be the right way to go. Think about utilizing teacher leaders, think about school improvement teams, faculty senates, whatever you may have in place in your district or state. But I think not going through your traditional route of principal-led conversations and having instead a staff-led conversation or the staff nominate someone who heads them who is trained, familiar with the tools, and reviews the data has been successful for us.

Trina Osher: The same issues apply to families or community members who should all have access to the survey results. They need to be educated and trained about using the data to be constructive rather than adversarial with the school. Public meetings where the survey results are presented or discussed should not be used to air complaints and express anger. Families don't necessarily know how to approach these conversations from a standpoint of communal action to improve school climate. School surveys should be promoted as a tool for families to participate in making positive change.

Q9. Do you think MDS3 will eventually go statewide?

Sarah Lindstrom Johnson: I'm hopeful. The goal of the Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative was to create a sustainable school climate survey. And that was the one of the reasons that we used a Web-based survey. We are in the process of developing middle and elementary school

versions because we have had such a positive response from the high schools, and we've had elementary and middle schools ask for this. So that is the plan.