

*Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together*

# **CURRICULUM GUIDE**

SECTION 4, STUDENT/TEACHER  
FEEDBACK MODULE

## *Best Practices*



*developed by*  
Helen Beattie, Ed.D.  
Bruce G. Perlow  
Mary Schell Whalen

*in partnership with*  
*many wise youth and adult guides*

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## SECTION 4

# Student/Teacher Feedback System Development

“Visible teaching and learning . . . It is teachers seeing learning through the eyes of students, and students seeing teaching as the key to their ongoing learning. The remarkable feature of the evidence is that the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers.”

—John Hattie

“To help educators understand how to engage and motivate each individual in a large, diverse group of teenagers, Eric Toshalis and Michael Nakkula review research on achievement motivation, school engagement, and student voice and highlight what works. They conclude that fostering student voice—empowering youth to express their opinions and influence their educational experiences so that they feel they have a stake in the outcomes—is one of the most powerful tools schools have to increase learning.”

—*Students at the Center, a Jobs for the Future project*

### WHAT WE ARE DISCOVERING ABOUT REGULAR CHECK-INS BY TEACHERS

Many YATST teams are discovering a common “puzzling gap” in their survey results and are identifying it as a concern they want to address. This gap is a very high frequency (generally over 90%) of teachers responding that they “Check in with students regularly to assess their learning and adapt instruction accordingly.” In contrast, very often one-third to one-half of students report that this is not their perception.

Student Question	Teacher Question
Teachers check in with me regularly to see if I am learning.	I check in with individual students regularly to see if they are learning.

*from YATST Survey*

## WHAT WE ARE DISCOVERING ABOUT STUDENTS INVOLVED IN DECISION MAKING

A second gap has also surfaced as a trend across YATST schools. Although there is often agreement between both teachers and students that students SHOULD be involved in decisions about teaching and learning, there is generally a much lower incidence of this actually taking place.

Student Question	Teacher Question
Students SHOULD be involved in decisions about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What they learn</li> <li>How teachers teach in the classroom</li> <li>School rules and procedures</li> <li>School climate</li> <li>How school is changing</li> </ul>	Students SHOULD be involved in decisions about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What they learn</li> <li>How teachers teach in the classroom</li> <li>School rules and procedures</li> <li>School climate</li> <li>How school is changing</li> </ul>
Students ARE involved in decisions about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What they learn</li> <li>How teachers teach in the classroom</li> <li>School rules and procedures</li> <li>School climate</li> <li>How school is changing</li> </ul>	Students ARE involved in decisions about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What they learn</li> <li>How teachers teach in the classroom</li> <li>School rules and procedures</li> <li>School climate</li> <li>How school is changing</li> </ul>

*from YATST Survey*

These gaps represent both challenges as well as opportunities for rigor and shared responsibility in the classroom.

## THE OPPORTUNITY: MID-SEMESTER STUDENT-TEACHER FEEDBACK

### Feedback Survey

In response to these findings, a number of YATST schools have implemented a mid-semester student-teacher feedback system. This is a means to assure that all students experience at least one point in time in their courses where they have an opportunity to provide teachers with feedback about how the class is working for them, enter into dialogue about classroom issues, and then benefit from subsequent changes. This written questionnaire is developed around the 4 Rs (Rigor, Relevance, Relationships and Shared Responsibility) to reinforce the essential role these four factors play in engagement. It is administered early to mid-semester so that it shapes the learning experience for the remainder of the semester.

Since learning is a partnership, most feedback systems also including a student self-assessment as a learner. Questions like, “Am I well prepared for class?” and “Do I hold high personal standards for my work?” provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their role as learning partners and set their own goals. This component of feedback reinforces the active role of both learners and teachers.

YATST is based on a belief that change and relationship-building happens through dialogue. For this reason, these surveys are accompanied by an expectation that teachers will lead a classroom discussion about the survey results, noting strengths and addressing areas that surfaced which do not seem to be working for learners. Ideally, the teacher then sets a goal to modify their instructional choices or curriculum in response to this feedback.

## Dialogue

YATST is based on a belief that change and relationship-building happens through dialogue. For this reason, these surveys are accompanied by an expectation that teachers will lead a classroom discussion about the survey results, noting strengths and addressing areas which surfaced which do not seem to be working for learners. Ideally, the teacher then sets a goal to modify their instructional choices or curriculum in response to this feedback.

## Teacher and Student Ownership of Survey & Dialogue Outcomes

Importantly, the survey results are NOT shared with any other individuals (principals or department chairs) for evaluation purposes. The intention of feedback systems is to build the youth-adult learning partnership through trust and mutual respect. As soon as survey data is used for evaluation purposes, threatening job security, it potentially limits (or erodes) the trusting relationship we hope to build between students and teachers. It flips the classic teacher-student power differential, rather than equalizing it. When people feel equally valued and invested in one another, deep and sustainable change is possible. However, there are examples in schools where teachers can self-select what evidence they provide to support their professional learning goals. Feedback systems can provide great insight when used in this way and meet teacher needs at the same time.

## Results

“This is just scratching the surface” was the reflection of two students at Hazen Union who took a lead role in developing one school’s system. They noted that this sort of check-in should be woven into the fabric of the daily school experience. This practice provides teachers and students to understand the integral role they both play in the learning process and the essential nature of on-going dialogue to shape the best learning experience possible. In the words of researcher John Hattie (2009), “Teachers see learning through the eyes of students; students see themselves as their own teachers”.

Student reflections from students after participating in a mid-semester feedback cycle:

- ✦ And now I know that the staff really does want to make a difference.
- ✦ It makes you realize your assets and downfalls and how to change if necessary.
- ✦ I like the fact that you are interested in our opinion and realize now that communication is important.

Teacher reflections after participating in a mid-semester feedback cycle:

- ✦ I will consciously attempt to use more variety of teaching methods. I will try to bring in more “real world” connections.
- ✦ I liked most that it was a discussion that otherwise I would be unlikely to have with a class.

- ♦ I would have to say that one of the best things about using this tool has been the speedy feedback. For both of my classes that took the survey, I had results that same night. This made it possible to discuss replies the very next day.
- ♦ ...the surveys open a line of communication, and give the students and teachers a place to start when having this sort of conversation. I found the students were much more open discussing their thoughts after taking the survey.

## Considerations

The potential transformative nature of this process is clear, creating a far stronger learning partnership. However, the threat a new mid-semester feedback system poses to faculty cannot be understated. New student roles in the feedback and self-assessment process are also key factors to be taken into consideration. The path to develop the right instrument for your school AND means to implement this system which ensures the greatest possible faculty and student buy-in, is a very complex task. This module walks through key steps and considerations in the design process, and provides examples from schools which have implemented such a system.

As in all YATST work, the process of designing and introducing this tool is as important (or perhaps more so) than the “product” itself. Please take time to pace through each step in the implementation process and tailor it to your unique school.

# Where do we start? A step-wise progression...

This module will walk you through the essential steps in developing a quality feedback system, providing examples from existing efforts.

**8** Step 1: Develop Your Mission, Goal(s), and Founding Assumptions

**10** Step 2: Design Your Survey

- *Alignment with the 4 Rs*
- *Length*
- *Format*
- *Teacher feedback and student self-assessment as learner*
- *Customization of surveys*
- *Feedback Questions*

**17** Step 3: Pilot Your Survey

**18** Step 4: Address Implementation Choices

- *Mandatory or voluntary*
- *Anonymity*
- *Technology implications*
- *Who makes the survey*
- *Timing of survey administration*
- *To talk or not to talk*

**21** Step 5: Implementation

**21** Step 6: Assess the Impact

**29** Step 7: Reflect On and Fine Tune the Process

**30** Resources and Reading

## STEP 1

# Develop Your Mission, Goal(s) and Founding Assumptions

It is important that you are clear about what you want to accomplish in order to provide a touchstone for each phase in your design process. It will also allow you to be totally transparent with the community-at-large, allaying fears. Investing in this step will help you build trust and buy-in.

### **CONSIDER:**

1. Your overarching mission should clearly state a) what you intend to do, b) who is your audience, and c) what you expect for an outcome. Here is one example: Create a positive, safe, and constructive environment for on-going student-teacher communication about learning, in order to improve engagement in learning and enhance the quality of youth-adult partnerships.

2. Your goal(s) should clearly reference your data, which is driving this action. A goal should be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timed). For example:

*We will increase the number of students reporting that they perceive teachers are assessing their learning and adapting instruction accordingly from 55% to 80% by the end of the academic year. And/or...*

*We will increase the number of students reporting that they ARE involved in decisions about teaching and learning from 45% to 75% by the end of the school year.*

3. Your assumptions are those core beliefs that are driving your work - the thinking behind all your decisions. Your ability to be compelling, strengths-based and transparent about these assumptions is one powerful way to create community trust and support. It is your opportunity to put fears to rest early on. Please refer to one Vermont school's "Assumptions about Student-Teacher Feedback" as a means to help you draft your own document.

As change agents, be very intentional when crafting these statements. Make sure you have considered the source of both student and teacher fears/concerns, and check that you have addressed these (or at least not heightened them) by the wording of your assumptions. Crafting one core set of assumptions for both students and teachers is advantageous in that it represents strength in your common beliefs. Customize some statements to address the particular perspective of either the student or teacher group (see last bullet on the list as teacher-focused example).

These three elements, your mission, goals and founding assumptions, should become a centerpiece of implementing your feedback system. Use them to introduce your work, and refer to them as you go through design phase. Make sure you are being true to them during implementation. Assess your goals and assumptions as a means to guide changes and to chart your success.

## **FOUNDING ASSUMPTIONS OF STUDENT-TEACHER FEEDBACK SYSTEM:**

- ✦ Education is a partnership between students and teachers. As such, both parties benefit from examining their roles and “tuning” their practices on a regular basis.
- ✦ A structured feedback system provides an avenue for all student to have a voice, affirming the importance of their role in their educational experience.
- ✦ Mutual respect and trust are fostered by student-teacher communication regarding the educational experience.
- ✦ Students feel that their opinions matter and they can contribute to positive change.
- ✦ Students learn more about the rationale for teacher decisions and therefore can more readily support them.
- ✦ Teachers have a greater understanding of each student’s perspective and needs and can adapt accordingly.
- ✦ Teachers are recognized for what they do well.
- ✦ Students are recognized for what they do well.
- ✦ The student-teacher feedback process lessens potential power issues between teachers and students, thereby contributing to a positive classroom climate.
- ✦ Goal setting is a critical skill that can enhance personal, academic and professional performance.
- ✦ Personal and professional growth occurs more readily through self-reflection and self-discovery than through mandated “outside forces”.

## STEP 2

# Design Your Survey

### **CONSIDERATION 1: ALIGNMENT WITH THE 4 RS**

Establishing a common language between students and teachers is a YATST goal. This feedback system is another opportunity to reinforce the 4 Rs and systematically build them in our schools to positively influence engagement. You will find a large array of possible questions relating to each of the R's to choose from in this module. This is not to say that other specific questions shouldn't be added. For example, one school noted the importance of pacing and included that as another item.

### **CONSIDERATION 2: LENGTH**

It is important to limit the length of the survey so that students remain engaged in the task. Keep it as short as possible, choosing only the most important questions. We estimate the average respondent takes a little over four minutes to complete 36 questions

### **CONSIDERATION 3: FORMAT**

Please refer to the YATST Curriculum Guide Survey Module for key points to consider when developing any survey. Do not underestimate how difficult it can be! From experience. . .

- ✦ Be particularly careful that the answer options are consistent with the question. For example, do not ask if the survey taker agrees or disagrees with a question that asks for “how often” something is occurring.
- ✦ Consider if you want to offer a “don't know” or “not sure” option. Generally students do have an opinion because they have experienced the classroom. They may just not be used to naming it. Include questions that EVERY student can have an opinion about.
- ✦ Consider answer options that are varied to keep the survey taker engaged. Many students are “survey weary” and will zone out if there is no variety. Teachers particularly appreciate some explanation of a given rating. It may be advantageous to include an option to explain your response with a short answer. In order to make the analysis of data efficient, write statements for respondents to respond to with the following likert-type scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. Simplicity facilitates analysis.
- ✦ Offer at least 4 answer choices (see above Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) so that people are more discerning when they reflect on their answer. A simple “Yes or No” choice is limiting and can frustrate respondents.

## **CONSIDERATION 4: TEACHER FEEDBACK AND STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A LEARNER**

Learning is a partnership. Soliciting insights from both students and teachers reinforces this belief. You will see both teacher and student question sets in the example provided. Having a way for students to set goals based on their self assessment reinforces their control and accountability as a partner, in the same way teachers are asked to engage in dialogue and set goals based on their reflections.

## **CONSIDERATION 5: CUSTOMIZATION OF SURVEYS**

Teachers frequently ask to be able to customize their survey to their particular classroom needs. In the age of Google Forms, Google Forms and other powerful and simple survey programs, makes this possible. You will need to decide how much flexibility you are comfortable with, while preserving the intention of the survey. Be clear which questions you feel are non-negotiable from a YATST perspective (i.e. some sampling of each of the Rs). Decide what questions can be “sacrificed” in order to customize this tool, contain its length, and assure that it is relevant to the teacher.

# Question Bank for Student-Teacher Feedback Survey

This set of sample questions are based on the Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together survey, student-teacher feedback survey created by Peoples Academy YATST & Williamstown High School YATST as well as by the Great Schools Partnership\* iWalkThrough initiative from the larger Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) research project. Research has proven that these classroom qualities have a significant impact on learning. The chosen questions have an “actionable” quality, so that teachers can institute clear changes based on this feedback. They are offered as examples of well constructed and research-based questions to consider when creating your own surveys.

## **RIGOR**

*The questions in this section will provide me with information regarding rigor in my classroom. I want to know how my teaching is challenging and develops the capacity for you to understand content that is complex, provocative and personally challenging.*

1. My teacher has high academic expectations for ALL students in this class
2. My teacher has high academic expectations for me in this class.
3. I have high academic expectations for myself in this class.
4. This class challenges me as a learner.
5. I am often challenged to figure out complex problems/issues on my own rather than being told the answer in this class.
6. I am often encouraged to use original thinking and creativity in this class.
7. My teacher uses a variety of teaching strategies so that learning is challenging in this class.
8. When I struggle academically I am given the support I need to be successful in this class.
9. I am taught the skills to be an independent learner and thinker in this class.
10. I am often challenged to become an independent learner and thinker in this class.
11. My teacher believes that failure is an opportunity to grow in this class.
12. Mistakes are acknowledged as an important part of the learning process in this class.
13. I am allowed to revise my work before getting a final grade in this class.
14. I am allowed to complete my work at my own pace.
15. My grades are an accurate reflection of what I have learned in this class.
16. My teacher encourages me to do my best.
17. I take an active role to make new knowledge my own in this class.
18. My teacher provides support for me when the work is hard and I want to give up.
19. My teacher knows how to build on my strengths as a learner.
20. My teacher wants me to apply my thinking skills, not just memorize facts.
21. My teacher makes sure that I demonstrate my knowledge before I pass an assignment.

## RELEVANCE

*The questions in this section will provide me with information regarding relevance in my classroom. I want to know how my teaching connects course content with your past learning, personal/social learning and future academic & career goals.*

1. This class is preparing me ...
  - To succeed in college
  - To get a good job
  - To know how to learn independently
  - To be a good citizen
  - To get along well with others
  - To get along with diverse groups.
2. I have many opportunities for hands-on learning in this class.
3. I often work on real-world problems in this class.
4. My teacher often adjusts what s/he teaches to capture my interest.
5. My teacher in this class helps me to understand how the things he/she is teaching in the classroom matter in the real world.
6. This class builds on what I have learned in prior years.
7. My teacher often includes other subject areas or disciplines when I study a topic.
8. I often use up-to-date technology as part of my learning in this class.
9. I am learning how to collaborate with others to solve problems/accomplish tasks in this class.
10. I am aware of what is needed for success beyond high school because of what I learn in this class.
11. This class helps me understand what is happening in my everyday life.

## RELATIONSHIPS

*The questions in this section will provide me with information regarding relationships in our class. I want to know how relationships impact your learning.*

1. My teacher and I treat each other with respect.
2. I respect my teacher in this class.
3. My teacher in this class treats me fairly.
4. My teacher views me as an individual rather than part of a group.
5. I have individual discussions with my teacher about... (once a week or more, a few times a month, once a month, a few times a year, never)
  - Who I want to become as a person
  - What I want to do in my future
  - Personal or emotional concerns
  - Interests and things that are important to me
  - Plans for college or work after high school
  - My worries

6. My teacher tries to do what is best for me.

7. My teacher really tries to understand how I feel.

8. My teacher makes me feel that s/he really cares about me.

9. My teacher makes an effort to get to know me.

10. Students in this class treat the teacher with respect.

### **RESPONSIBILITY (SHARED)**

*The questions in this section will provide me with information regarding shared responsibility in my classroom. I want to know how we both share responsibility in making learning successful. I also want to know if you feel as though your perspectives are included in decision making on issues impacting you in this class.*

1. My teacher checks in with me regularly to see if I am learning.

2. My teacher adjusts instruction based on what s/he observes along with my own feedback about my learning.

3. My teacher values what I have to say.

4. I feel I SHOULD be involved in decisions about:

- what I learn
- how I am taught in the classroom
- class rules and procedures
- classroom climate
- my teacher's new ways of teaching

5. I AM involved in decisions about:

- what I learn
- how I am taught in the classroom
- class rules and procedures
- classroom climate
- my teacher's new ways of teaching

6. I am encouraged to say what I think.

7. I provide feedback to my teacher about his/her teaching practices.

8. I provide feedback to my teacher on his/her teaching practices on a regular basis.

9. My teacher is willing to learn from me.

10. I am encouraged to be a reflective learner - continually monitoring and adjusting my approach to learning.

11. My learning in this class is based on a partnership between me and my teacher.

12. I feel empowered to make decisions about my learning in this class.

## **MINDSET AND MOTIVATION**

*The questions in this section focus on broader factors for engagement, that affect your mindset and motivation in this class.*

1. I care about this class.

2. I look forward to coming to this class.

3. I really want to learn in this class.

4. Students in this class care about learning.

5. I participate regularly in this class.

6. I seek help when I don't understand what is being taught in this class.

7. It is often hard to pay attention in this class because I'm worrying about problems outside of school.

8. I feel that I belong (am accepted and liked) in this class.

9. I have skipped class this class. (yes/no)

10. Have you ever seriously considered dropping this class? (yes/no)

11. If "yes" to either of the two above, please check your reason(s) below:

- I did not feel prepared for class
- I was being bullied or harassed by other students
- I was not getting along with my teacher
- I did not feel safe in this class
- I was bored
- I had family responsibilities

12. My teacher makes learning engaging in this class.

13. My teacher is enthusiastic about teaching this class.

14. Which of the following best reflects your ideas about the nature of an individual's ability to learn?

- My ability to learn was largely fixed at birth.
- My ability to learn was largely fixed at birth but can be influenced somewhat by my environment.
- My ability to learn was largely not fixed at birth. It grows through my effort, use and the right kinds of support.

15. I put forth my best effort in this class.

16. This class inspires me to learn.

17. I believe I can make a difference in this world because of what I am learning in this class.

18. I am excited about my future because of this class.

19. I am confident that I will achieve my future goals because of what I am learning in this class.

20. I believe going to school or college after high school is important to prepare me for my career because of this class.

21. Grades (letter or numbers) are essential in order to motivate me to learn in this class.
22. I am afraid to try something if I think I may fail in this class.
23. My teacher believes in me and expects me to be successful.
24. I believe in myself and expect to be successful in this class.
25. I set goals for my own learning in this class.
26. I choose strategies and plan steps to help me reach my goal.
27. Setbacks don't discourage me in this class; I am persistent and I don't give up in this class.
28. I understand how I learn in this class (including what helps me learn and what makes it difficult).
29. I have strategies to avoid traps that make learning difficult for me in this class.

**STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT**

*Since learning is a partnership, I want to provide an opportunity for you to share who you are as a learner in this class with me.*

So far in THIS CLASS ... Score the following statements on a Scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Not Applicable

1. I have been well prepared for class time work.

2. I hold high personal standards for my work.

3. I am well organized.

4. I am self-motivated.

5. I ask questions and participate in discussions.

6. I have been an active listener.

7. When I am faced with a challenge, I am persistent.

8. I treat others with respect.

9. I have been treated by others with respect.

10. I understand and participate in the assessment of my learning.

One area I would like to improve in as a student in THIS CLASS is... (open ended response, not scale)

## STEP 3

# Pilot Your Survey

### **TEST YOUR SURVEY**

It is very important to pilot, test out, your survey first in your team, and then in a small pilot, for two reasons:

1. You will catch errors in the survey design and/or the instructions you give.
2. You build understanding and support by valuing the opinions of both the teacher and student feedback during a pilot phase. The more the community-at-large feels that they have had a part in the design of this effort, the more ownership they will have.

### **BE STRATEGIC IN YOUR PILOT**

Think about finding a willing teacher in each department, so that you begin to influence teachers across departments and they will become your allies. Ask the school's leadership team to help you with the pilot design, building support for your efforts.

### **ASK FOR FEEDBACK**

Make sure you collect both student and teacher feedback in writing and that they know that their feedback was integrated into final edits. You can recognize this feedback by making appropriate changes and also write a short summary article in the school newsletter or blog for the school website, provide a brief overview at a school-wide assembly or an update in each Teacher Advisory meeting. (Note: You may well find that you have conflicting feedback, and will need to sort through and be able to justify your ultimate decision).

## STEP 4

# Address Implementation Choices

### MANDATORY OR VOLUNTARY?

As in most things, there are pros and cons to deciding to implement the feedback system on a voluntary or a mandatory basis. Here is a quick analysis:

	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
<b>VOLUNTARY</b>	<p>There is consistent support by teachers implementing it, increasing the likelihood of its effectiveness. These teachers can then become advocates for greater use of the tool within the faculty.</p> <p>This choice assures that the system is not implemented poorly by individuals who are uncomfortable or resistant about soliciting student feedback. This could lead to discrediting of the tool or build student resistance.</p>	<p>Only some teachers (likely those already soliciting different sorts of student feedback) will volunteer to use the feedback system. It may not touch those classrooms where the feedback is most needed (where there is low engagement and the teacher is not comfortable with or does not value student feedback).</p>
<b>MANDATORY</b>	<p>ALL teachers take part in building student voice in learning, especially those who most need this input. It is a strong statement from leadership that student voice is an institutional value and is not choice. This potentially becomes a school norm more quickly (dependent on amount of resistance).</p> <p>Even though there is a school-wide directive to use the feedback system, it comes from a student-centered belief and research that it is in the best interest of learning. Once teachers experience the positive outcomes of meaningful dialogue, they will then engage in the feedback process not because of an outside mandate but rather because it clearly improves classroom learning and relationships with students.</p>	<p>Teachers resent another mandate and resist the effort based on a top-down directive. They may implement it half-heartedly or poorly and sabotage the undertaking.</p> <p>The YATST change paradigm is based on dialogue and building support, not a top-down decision making process for change. This may confuse that message.</p>

You might consider an incremental implementation process, with the first year being volunteers from each department utilizing the instrument, followed by the expectation that all teachers will embrace this practice, and be supported to do so. In the meantime, regularly share testimony of the teachers who find the feedback valuable, developing a larger group of allies to support this practice school-wide. Also, collect and share data from students regarding their positive responses to this opportunity. Be strategic change agents in this implementation process! It will take time, but it is well worth it in order to embed this practice into the culture of the school.

You will make your own decision about your “roll out” choices. It is critical to involve the principal in this decision. He or she must be fully supportive of your choice, particularly if you decide to push for use by all teachers.

## **ANONYMITY**

Generally anonymity is assured for any student providing feedback. This is quite easily accomplished with computer surveys. If you want students to be able to identify a goal or ask for help with their learning as an option, you may want to make this a follow-up step that is openly shared with the teacher.

## **TECHNOLOGY IMPLICATIONS**

### **Software Tools**

Several possible on-line survey tools are free to use and straightforward in their set up. Most schools utilize Google Forms for their YATST survey, as it is easy to use and offers immediate results, including in graph form.

### **Making a survey**

The majority of the questions are often considered “Matrix” or Likert scale responses. The response choices typically are “strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree” but you can make the survey more interesting by varying these according to the specific questions. You may consider “does not apply” as well (but please do not use “don’t know”). When offering an open-ended response, make sure there is a generous word number option.

### **Who makes the survey**

One Vermont school had success in providing a question pool for faculty and they then designed their own surveys. This does require a fair amount of self-initiative on the part of faculty members but it worked for them. Alternately, you might provide a non-negotiable “skeleton” array of questions and then suggest customization by faculty, if they desire. This provides more continuity and alignment with the 4 Rs, while assuring the tool’s relevance to teachers. Finally, you could simply provide one survey that everyone uses, to introduce the tool in the simplest fashion. Ideally this decision will be made in collaboration with the principal and involved teachers during the pilot phase.

### **Timing of the survey administration**

One school quickly discovered how important timing was when all students took the feedback survey in all classes over a two week period. By the third administration, the students were becoming impatient with the redundancy and support was tailing off. This led to a more carefully orchestrated plan the next time to make sure the survey was administered over a greater number of weeks, with each department signing up for one particular week.

## To talk... or not to talk

By far the most intimidating aspect of the feedback system for teachers is the request that they discuss the survey results with the class soon after it is taken. They are asked to:

- ✦ Review what is working well in the classroom (always start with strengths!!),
- ✦ Review what does not seem to be working for a number of students,
- ✦ Develop new strategies and goals in response to the feedback, sharing this process with students through dialogue.
- ✦ Check in periodically to assess if the goal is being implemented and if the changes are working.

Some schools have deliberated about a progression of first just asking that the survey be taken, and then moving at a later date to wrapping the dialogue piece into the model. We admit a clear bias on this one. If we believe that the vehicle for partnership and deepening student-teacher relationships is through trust and mutual respect developed through dialogue, then omitting this aspect of the feedback system is a lost opportunity. At the very least, consider introducing the dialogue as a component of the model, which will initially be optional. Encourage those who are willing to do so, to share their successes with their dialogue sessions. At the same time, offer help for those who are reluctant or fearful.

It is very important to couple the request for dialogue with training and support. Teachers will have to deal with inevitable differences of opinion in the surveys, which can pose a quandary. They might feel that some respondents did not take it seriously, given the tone of some responses, and not know what to do with this fact. They may feel conflicted by external pressures of content delivery and student requests for flexibility or a slower pace. They may feel overwhelmed with criticisms (even when few in number) and be unable to hold the identified strengths in balance with these (often the case). We can be our own worst critics! YATST (on an individual or group level) can offer an on-going support system for faculty to sort through these survey result dilemmas and help teachers find what is most meaningful in the data to inform their teaching.

## STEP 5

# Implementation

### CREATING COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

Once you have made all these decisions about your particular design, it is time to educate the school community about what you are doing. This is an excellent opportunity to help folks understand what YATST is, by implementing a system that is a living example of our guiding principles: 1) change through dialogue, 2) the 4 Rs, and 3) student- teacher partnership in learning. Reminding the school community that this effort evolved from survey data they generated builds a deeper community-wide understanding of the action research aspect of YATST.

**Teachers:** Teachers should be the first group provided with an understanding of your mission, goals and founding assumptions, as well as details about the design of the feedback system you have devised. Incorporating testimony of new allies who have perhaps participated in the pilot is always advantageous. Faculty meetings can be a perfect forum for this orientation. A sample letter to teachers from Peoples Academy is attached. The creation and implementation of a student-teacher feedback system provides evidence of Vermont's Transferable Skills including Self-Direction and Creative and Practical Problem Solving performance indicators.

**Student Body:** Providing teacher feedback may well feel foreign and uncomfortable for students. They will appreciate a similar orientation to understand the rhyme and reason for this new effort and an overview of the details. This is the time to introduce a vision of youth-adult partnership in learning, and your belief in the potential of this feedback opportunity as a building block for this partnership. Your confidence in this tool will help them to believe in it and take it seriously.

The Peoples Academy YATST team developed a humorous and informative video that was shown to the student body in advance of implementation. Student assemblies are also an effective means to provide background information. Many YATST teams also utilize the Teacher Advisory groups, leading individual discussions in these advisories in advance of the first survey round.

**Parent Community:** An article in the school newsletter is one means to unveil this new undertaking. An active Parent Organization could partner with you to spread the word. Writing up a local press release or sparking a feature story in a local paper are options as well.

**School Administration:** As previously noted, it is critical that the principal believe in the value of this effort and take every opportunity to reinforce its importance.

## SAMPLE LETTER TO FACULTY

*Note: teachers are provided here with the opportunity to choose questions from a list of potential questions. You will want to adapt the letter to reflect your feedback survey expectations.*

### Dear High School Teachers,

Our school's YATST (Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together) team is working toward its goals of "increasing youth engagement and youth-adult partnership in school" by encouraging all teachers to give students a mid-semester feedback form in each of their classes. The results of the student feedback survey are confidential between you and your students and they are anonymous. They encourage students to describe to you how they are experiencing your instruction and curriculum so far this year. The form also asks students to reflect on their own roles in their learning in the class.

We believe that learning is a partnership between teachers and students. Teachers that have participated in getting feedback from students and engaging in dialogue based on the feedback have commented:

*"I would have to say that one of the best things about using this tool has been the speedy feedback. For both of my classes that took the survey, I had results to read over that same night. This made it possible to discuss replies the very next day. "*

*"...the surveys open a line of communication, and give the students and teachers a place to start when having this sort of conversation. I found the students were much more open discussing their thoughts after taking the survey."*

The attached survey template addresses both teachers' and students' roles in learning.

The questions are organized into the four Rs of engagement: Rigor, Relevance, Relationship and Responsibility and includes questions on Mindset and a Student Self-Assessment. We believe that asking students to give you feedback as well as to reflect on their own role in class can create a powerful dialogue for your class as well as demonstrates shared responsibility for learning.

The attached questions are not the "set list" by any means. Edit them, remove some, add others... this process is meant to give students a voice that is listened to, so please make the questions useful to you and your students.

To ask students about their experiences with learning is, by its very nature, engaging. Your survey questions allow students to reflect on curriculum and instruction and show your interest in their voices. Teachers have a feel for how things are going, and the mid-semester feedback is a great time to see if the students' perspectives match your own. Students usually share exciting and insightful ideas.

The mid-semester feedback is also a powerful tool to reveal strengths in your practice. The **most important** piece of the mid-semester feedback is the conversation that happens after you go over your results. The goal is for the form to spark a conversation about, "how class is going." For assistance and further discussion, check in with us. ... Or come to our next YATST meeting.

**Please do not give the form out to students and then not follow up. That might send the message to students that we are going to ask you what you think, but then not care about what you shared. That could hurt future attempts to generate student dialogue.**

Teachers are asked to give the survey during the week of October 17 and follow up with discussion the following day. Monday, Block 1 classes will take the survey; Tuesday, Block 2; Wednesday, Block 3; and on Friday, Block 4.

We will present at the school-wide community meeting on October 12 to share with students and teachers the purpose and goal of this YATST project that grew out of the results of YATST survey taken early this year.

Thanks!

## STEP 6

# Assess the Impact

How do you know that the feedback system was successful? Here are a few ways:

### **1. COLLECT GENERAL FEEDBACK ABOUT THE SYSTEM**

You will see samples of a teacher and student written surveys done at one Vermont school as a follow-up to their pilot. You might also orchestrate small group or grade level discussions to solicit feedback, or ask for time at a faculty meeting to collect thoughts and reflections instead of giving a written survey.

General feedback will provide you with important information about what you need to improve to make the effort even more successful. Every time you lead a dialogue about the feedback, you are reinforcing your goal of youth-adult partnership in learning. The process of soliciting feedback and discussing that feedback with the community is as transformative as is the feedback system itself!

### **2. COLLECT SURVEY DATA RELATING TO YOUR GOALS**

You certainly want to know if your efforts are closing the gaps you identified as concerns and check in on your goals. You can pull those questions from the initial YATST survey and use them exactly as stated in a mini-survey. You may also want to find out additional information that relates specifically to changes you hope will happen due to the feedback system (see survey sample).

Give students and teachers enough opportunity to experience the benefits of several feedback cycles before you collect “outcome data” relating to your goals. Every cycle of experiencing the student-teacher feedback survey and follow-up discussion leads to deeper understanding of its intention and appreciation of its impact.



**6. What did you like least about the follow-up discussions?**

**7. Did you set any goal(s) for yourself because of the surveys? \_\_\_yes \_\_\_no**

If yes, please give one example.

**8. Do you think the quality of your learning and teaching at (name of school) will change because of these student-teacher discussions happening on a regular basis?**

1	2	3	4	5
No effect		Maybe		Change will definitely happen

**9. What suggestions do you have for future changes in the feedback system (either the survey, the discussions or both)?**

**10. Other thoughts?**

# Teacher Mid-Semester Feedback Follow-Up Survey

Grade(s) You Teach: \_\_\_\_\_

**1. Please rate your level of satisfaction with the Mid-Semester Feedback system (survey & discussion time):**

1	2	3	4	5
Not satisfied		Okay		Very satisfied

**2. What did you like most about the surveys that you gave to students?**

**3. What did you like least about the surveys that you gave to students?**

**4. Please rate your level of satisfaction with the follow-up discussions you had in your classes to review the survey results:**

1	2	3	4	5
Not satisfied		Okay		Very satisfied

Please check here if students took the survey in a class but did not have a follow-up discussion: \_\_\_\_\_

How many classes did this happen in? \_\_\_\_\_

If you did not have a discussion in some or all of your classes, please note why these did not occur, then skip to question 7.

**5. What did you like most about the follow-up discussions?**

**6. What did you like least about the follow-up discussions?**

**7. Will your teaching or curriculum change in any way as a result of the mid-semester feedback system? If yes, please give at least one example of a change you will make:**

**8. Do you think the quality of learning and teaching at (name of your school) will change because of these student-teacher discussions happening on a regular basis?**

1	2	3	4	5
No effect		Maybe		Change will definitely happen

**9. What suggestions do you have for future changes in the feedback system (either the survey, the discussions or both)?**

**10. Other thoughts?**

## STEP 7

# Reflect On and Tune the Process

It was telling to sit in a YATST graduate course meeting several years ago and have every faculty member there describe how they once had had a student feedback system, but in every instance, it had “disappeared”! Your mid-semester feedback system needs to be tended over time or risk the same fate! It will require on-going tuning and refining, and will greatly benefit from YATST insistence on its importance.

Do not forget to wrap the principal into your efforts. The value leadership assigns to student-teacher feedback is one of the strongest predictors of its survival!

Often the “three-year phenomena” kicks in:

- + YEAR 1: WHAT is this new “thing”? WHY do we have to do it? HOW will it ever get done? Do we have to??
- + YEAR 2: Since this is a reality, let’s work out the bugs.
- + YEAR 3: Well, of course! We have always had a student-teacher feedback loop here!

You are the champion and guardian of this important means to create and sustain deep and meaningful youth-adult partnerships in learning. It is at the heart of YATST’s mission and vision.

(Did you notice that this step-by-step process is actually a mini-action research cycle?)

# Reading and Resources

## Hacking Feedback: Seeking And Receiving Feedback From Students

By Sean McComb, December 1, 2015

One of my favorite education books is *The Courage to Teach*. In that text, Parker Palmer explores teaching as a daily exercise in vulnerability. As teachers, we expose ourselves, and often the content we love, to an at-times unforgiving world. Difficult students, dud lessons, doubting colleagues, short-sighted initiatives, all exacerbated by the challenges of our lives outside the classroom, can eventually harden a teacher. And that skepticism can make it a lot harder to take the risks necessary to get better.

So finding the courage to continue to care deeply, to continue to seek feedback, can be challenging. But I've found, as scary as it may be, that student feedback has been an important catalyst for reflecting on and improving my practice. Hearing directly from students also aligns with my own deepest motivations. More than test scores, or my desire to introduce students to great novels and great questions, I teach so that students feel someone believes in them and they feel empowered to learn, grow, and succeed. Measuring success on that mission requires hearing directly from students.

### Student Survey

My first venture into gaining feedback from students took the form of an end-of-course survey. To select the questions, I drew on Kathleen Cushman's *Fires in the Bathroom* and my own curiosities. The students' feedback was helpful. I didn't have to guess how they felt the course went; they were able to tell me. I was impressed by the specificity with which students could recall individual lessons and incidences from class, and the value of their suggestions for improvement. It was wonderful food for thought as a reflective practitioner.

I had students respond anonymously, so they could be more honest, but this year I'll give students the opportunity to provide their name. I hope that knowing the source can help me contextualize the feedback for specific responders, but I also want to offer anonymity if they prefer.

About half the questions were open response and the other half asked students to respond with their level of agreement across a likert scale. It's no surprise that I gained much more actionable feedback from the open response items. The levels of agreement provided a good snapshot, but I was left wanting. For the outlier students in either direction, I wanted to know why. What was it that made a positive or negative difference for that individual?

The survey was definitely a step in the right direction, but reading them in June was also a little sad. I could make changes for the next group, but I was left thinking, what if I had known earlier? What if I had known and been able to engage in conversations about alternatives?

## Student-Led Focus Groups

My desire for more of a conversation — a back-and-forth exchange of perspectives with students — led me to the decision to have students lead a focus group on my instruction and debrief the feedback with me.

Toward the end of the first quarter, knowing I would be out for the next class, I briefed my classes on the plan. I told them that I was interested in hearing from them about how class was going, that I wanted to keep improving and become a better teacher for them, and that their thoughtful input was vital. Then I asked for volunteers to lead conversations with their classmates the next day, when I would be out. I spoke briefly with the volunteers and answered questions about the process: I directed them to collect student-responses, look for trends in the conversations, and during their conversations push for suggestions and solutions from their peers.

I left the substitute with a half-sheet to give students to complete before beginning their other tasks. It had the following questions:

- ♦ What is something that's been going well for you in this class?
- ♦ What is something that hasn't been going well for you?
- ♦ Has there been a time in class when you felt disrespected? What happened? How could it have been handled differently?
- ♦ Have you found anything about this class frustrating? Can you think of a way that it could be improved?
- ♦ Do you feel that you are becoming a better learner in this class? Explain.

I left directions to allow the student-leaders, halfway through the period, to group up and lead conversations around these questions. The student-leaders led their conversations and collected their peers' responses. A few days after my return, we met during a lunch period to discuss their feedback.

The conversation was extraordinary. That's not to say that it was all positive. There were a lot of positives, and there were questions, there were challenges, and there were moments of surprise, when I could have and should have been better, that were disappointing. It was honest. It was real. And it was invaluable towards helping me become a better teacher. Thankfully, Teaching Channel was in the house to capture it, so video snippets will soon be available.

What was, perhaps, most impressive was the maturity and insight with which the students handled the conversation. They were nuanced in delivering feedback from the many and the few. They were sensitive to competing pressures. And as I explained my reasoning and choices, they were understanding, but still pushed me to seek solutions. A few times I was truly at a loss for how to address an issue, and they were creative and stepped in to provide solutions that I have since put into action. I shudder to think about what it would be like if the class train kept rolling down the tracks without me having this insight into the student experience the student-led focus group strategy offered.

Not to be overlooked is the importance of modeling. One student noted the impact of my simply being open and asking for feedback from the students, and what that said to them about continuing to learn and grow.

Do you tap students to gain feedback on your instruction and classroom environment? What strategies do you use? Could you implement a survey or focus-group into your practice?

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