

A Three-Step Guide to Developing Effective Surveys

True or False: Surveys help educational professionals make important decisions for school improvement.

OK, I'll admit that's a trick question. The answer depends on the quality of the survey.

In my experience working with principals, survey data is often used as frequently as student test scores to indicate school progress. When you administer a survey, however, the challenge is to make sure it elicits responses that give you viable information you can use. Although it's possible you might find a previously developed

survey that fits your needs, it's more likely you will not. That means you will have to create one.

The way in which you write and present both the questions and the response choices determines how reliable your results will be. The road to reliability begins with a clear objective for each question, a well-designed structure, and a correct choice of responses to match the question. When created in this way, the survey will deliver consistent responses with repeated use, which leads to confidence in the results.

The following three steps will guide you in developing an effective survey.

1. Creating the Right Questions

The most important step in the survey process is the first one: Write a question that will lead to a reliable response. Here are some helpful points to remember during the question design process.

Do:

- Make questions as clear, concise, and simple as possible;
- Cover one point only in each question—the more specific the question, the more likely the answer will produce useful information;
- Use familiar language—the reading level of the survey questions should match the reading level of your respondents; and

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- Make sure the meaning of the question will be interpreted in the same way by every respondent.

Don't:

- Phrase questions in the negative, using the word "not"—some respondents will fail to read that word, skewing the results;
- Create leading questions—those that point the respondent to a particular answer;
- Use words with emotional connotations or stereotypes, including gender or race demographics, unless that information is specifically important to your results; and
- Use jargon, slang, or unfamiliar terms.

Here is an example from a recent survey, with rewording suggested to

meet these guidelines.

Original wording: *Over the past few years, I have been encouraged not to fail students.*

Revised wording: *During the past three years, I have been encouraged by the school administration to pass students who were not sufficiently prepared for the next grade.*

2. Using Ordinal Scales for Responses

The most commonly used way to measure survey responses is with an ordinal scale, sometimes referred to as a Likert scale. An ordinal scale asks respondents to rank their response on a continuum from positive to negative. The format of a typical five-level ordinal scale is: *Strongly agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Strongly disagree*. However, the savvy principal can also use other response terms after determining the choice that best matches the question. Consider the following possibilities:

Magnitude. When you want to determine the degree of importance of a question, you can offer responses such as: *To a very great extent; To a great extent; To some extent; To a very little extent*. Other choices could be: *Extremely; Moderately; Slightly; Not at all*. For example: How much confidence do you have in your child's yearly achievement test results, as reported during parent conferences? *A very great deal; A great deal; Quite a bit; Some; Little; None.*

Satisfaction. At times you might wish to determine satisfaction with a process, a program, or an event. Use response items that will bring forth the intended response. For example: Are you satisfied with the 7 a.m. school start time? *Very satisfied; Somewhat satisfied; Satisfied; Somewhat dissatisfied; Very dissatisfied.*

Here's an alternate example: Using a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing perfect satisfaction and 1 representing not at all satisfied, how satisfied are you with the 7 a.m. school start time?

Frequency scales. *Always; Very often; Fairly often; Sometimes; Almost never; Never.*

Comparison scales. *Much more than others; Somewhat more than others; About the same as others; Somewhat less than others; Much less than others.*

Endorsements. Definitely true; True; Don't know; False; Definitely false.

Paired Opposites. At times you may find that paired opposites work better than an ordinal scale for answering a question. This method asks respondents to plot their answer on a continuum between the two opposing poles (Bainbridge, 1989). Such responses usually use a scale of 1 to 5, as shown here:

Creative	1	2	3	4	5	Uncreative
Compatible	1	2	3	4	5	Incompatible
Friendly	1	2	3	4	5	Unfriendly

For example: Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates friendly and 5 indicates unfriendly, please rate your perception of the friendliness of our school office staff when greeting you on the phone.

3. Reviewing and Pretesting Questions

Many inexperienced survey developers skip the review and pretest stage of the survey question design process. Although somewhat time-consuming, this crucial phase is worth the investment and will result in a higher rate of returned surveys and more reliable data.

First, have your questions reviewed by people knowledgeable about writing survey questions, such as a local university professor. Next, have your questions reviewed and answered by a few potential respondents. When asking for feedback, be specific and ask reviewers to respond to the following:

- Are instructions for completing the survey clearly written?
- Are the questions easy to understand?
- Are response choices mutually exclusive? Can only one choice be made?
- Is privacy respected and protected?
- Do you have suggestions regarding the addition or deletion of questions, or any improvements in format?
- Which rating scale is best for these responses?

In your own words, what does each question mean to you? (Fink, 1995)

Open-ended Questions

Closed-question or forced-choice surveys are likely to be more efficient and practical for the busy principal to administer and analyze. However, occasionally you might need to ask open-ended questions such as "What reasons do you have for choosing ABC Middle School?" There are a few caveats about these kinds of questions:

- Open-ended questions are best used when you don't know all the facets of an issue or believe there are unanticipated answers you can't determine in advance;
- Because they are more difficult to compare and interpret, open-ended questions are less likely to yield reliable data without additional time and effort; and
- Open-ended questions also require more time and thought from respondents, thus the rate of return may be disappointingly low.

The use of surveys in the educational community has grown remarkably as a method to collect data and present evidence in high-stakes decisions—for example, in principal evaluation or continued certification. To obtain reliable information, focus on well-designed questions and response choices.

Question: With these guidelines, how likely are you to successfully create your own survey and gather reliable results?

Answer: Extremely likely! 

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