



West Virginia VITAL Survey: Effectively Using the Survey Results

by

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Teaching conditions are critical to educator success and satisfaction. The West Virginia Vision for Improving Teaching and Learning (VITAL) Survey provides data to schools, districts, and the state about whether educators have the supportive school environments necessary for them to remain working and be successful with students. Almost 10,000 (43 percent) educators across the state shared their perceptions and data is now available for about 400 hundred West Virginia schools. This unique data represents the perceptions of those who understand these conditions best—the educators who experience them every day. But assessing teaching conditions is not like looking at other more neutral and quantifiable data points like student test scores, class size, etc. Getting honest, authentic input and dialogue, especially in schools where the basic building blocks of positive conditions—trust, time and leadership—are not in place can be challenging. Using information in a positive way toward school improvement is critical. Please consider the following when analyzing and using the West Virginia VITAL results.

1. Teaching conditions are an area for school improvement, not accountability.

Because teaching conditions are about schools, no one individual should be held solely accountable for the status of the school culture. Rather data gathered should be used to guide school improvement planning with schools then assessed on their progress toward implementing collectively developed reforms. If individual school administrators or teachers are assessed in these areas, this survey should serve as one of multiple data artifacts. Individuals can be encouraged to create specific performance goals about their role in creating and implementing data-driven strategies to improve teacher working conditions that are part of the school improvement plan.

2. Teaching conditions are not about any one individual and it will take a community effort to improve.

The principal holds a unique and important place within the school community and can have a significant impact on the professional culture in which teachers work. However, many aspects of teaching conditions are beyond the principal's control. Broader social trends, federal, state and district policies all impact how educators view and operate within their school and classroom. Conditions are about schools, not about individuals. So no one person should be viewed as responsible for creating or reforming school culture alone. No questions on this survey were about the principal. All questions were about school leadership, defined specifically as an individual, group of individuals or team within the school.

3. Perceptual data are real data.

While the survey results are perceptual data from educators about the presence of important teaching conditions, it does not mean it is not “valid” or as important as other data sources. Educator perceptions of the culture and context of their school have been linked in a number of studies to student learning, future employment plans, efficacy and motivation. Analyzing and using this information to improve schools is critical and needs to be a part of reform efforts at the school, district levels. Educators' perceptions are their reality. However, other data should be used to triangulate these findings



and provide a better understanding of these perceptions such as instructional expenditures, proportion of teachers working out of field, teacher/pupil ratio, etc.

4. Conversations need to be structured and safe.

Conversations about teaching conditions are often the lifeblood of teachers' lounges. Having data-driven dialogue about the findings of the survey, the root causes of educator perceptions, and potential reforms requires structure, facilitation, ground rules and the ability to separate issues from individuals. These are not easy conversations, and they become harder if they are not tackled systematically and predictably when all can participate in a meaningful and safe way.

5. Identify and celebrate positives as well as considering areas for improvement.

Educators have tremendous pride in the work they do and all want to work in a school that allows them to do their best work. And all schools have successes to draw upon as they assess and improve their context. Ensuring that positives are acknowledged and celebrated, while issues are identified and addressed, is an important part of moving forward.

6. Create a common understanding of what defines and shapes conditions.

Anything and everything might be considered a part of and influence on teacher working conditions. Research shows that broader social trends, media coverage, respect for the profession, local and state policies, etc. can all influence teachers' perceptions of their conditions and ultimately their motivation and efficacy as educators. The survey provides input from educators on a host of important research-based teaching conditions. Other areas may be worthy of further investigation, such as teaching assignments, curricular support, assessments and accountability, parent and community support, etc. These questions and responses are a starting point, not an ending point for understanding what is important to teachers for them to do their best work.

7. Focus on what you can solve.

Many issues that shape teaching conditions within a school or district are outside of their control, such as federal and state assessment policies, funding, etc. School improvement planning should focus on areas that can be addressed by the school community. District barriers to school-based solutions should be identified and constructive conversations across schools could occur locally. Other influences such as federal and state policy, broader social and community context, are areas for the school to think about in concert with others. A plan with solutions that cannot be reached through the efforts of the school community is not likely to be successful.

8. Solutions can be complex and long term.

Teaching conditions are cumulative and engrained. It took many years and faculty members to create them and it will take a similar amount of time to reform them. Some solutions may be inexpensive and simple to address, like having a more consistent means of communicating amongst the faculty, while others are resource intensive (class size reduction, integration of technology) or long range (building trust, creating authentic Professional Learning Communities). A school improvement plan must pay attention both to short and long term issues to successfully improve the school environment.