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# Differences between Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Their School Culture

## A Comparative Analysis

This report presents a comparative analysis of survey findings. Critical items from each of the four sections of the survey were analyzed and discussed for their implications of the current state of culture in schools. The report suggests how reflecting on the data can be a starting point for education leaders and teachers to change the school culture in the cause of school improvement.

Dr. Paul F. Ezen  
Successful Practices Network  
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# Differences between Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Their School Culture

Comparative Findings from the Successful Practices Network's  
WE Teach™ Instructional Staff Survey and WE Learn™ Student Survey (Grades 6-12)  
National Survey Data: 2008-2013

Dr. Paul F. Ezen  
Director of Academic Planning  
Scholastic Achievement Partners

## Looking Back

For more than 20 years, the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), under the leadership of Dr. Bill Daggett, has focused on improving our education system through the lens of relationships, rigor, and relevance. This vision led to the development of the *Rigor/Relevance Framework*® in the early 1990s, a conceptual model of curriculum and instruction that has become firmly entrenched as a guiding principle of teaching and learning in thousands of schools over the last two decades. As Dr. Daggett often says, “Relevance makes rigor possible, and strong, positive relationships between teachers and their students nurture relevance.”

In 2005, the not-for-profit Successful Practices Network (SPN), in partnership with ICLE and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), was selected by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to administer a multi-year grant to study rapidly improving high schools across the nation. Work on the grant led to collaboration with the Quaglia Institute to develop a set of surveys to capture staff and student perceptions of the culture of their schools. The result was the WE™ Survey Suite:

- WE Teach™ Instructional Staff Survey
- WE Learn™ Student Survey (Grades 3-5 and Grades 6-12)
- We Lead™ Whole Staff Survey
- We Support™ Community Survey
- We Are Career Ready Survey (Available Summer 2014)

Seven years of national data collected anonymously from hundreds of thousands of surveys provide insights into how school cultures are perceived by students and teachers. Such data has been — and can be — used to improve student engagement and achievement.

The WE Teach and WE Learn surveys measure teacher and student perceptions of the four important areas of rigor, relevance, relationships, and leadership in their schools. Parallel items can be used to directly compare perceptions among teachers and between teachers and students on related topics.

This report presents a comparative analysis of survey findings. Critical items from each of the four sections of the survey were analyzed and discussed for their implications of the current state of culture in schools. The report suggests how reflecting on the data can be a starting point for education leaders and teachers to change the school culture in the cause of school improvement.

## What WE Survey Data Can Provide

SPN's Gates' research, as well as SPN's WE Surveys, indicate that *culture trumps strategy*. This means that a school can adopt and seek to implement an improvement strategy, but if the culture is one that resists change or the staff and stakeholders misunderstand the reasons for the change, the strategy will not be embraced with the level of fidelity that is needed for successful implementation. In other words, the school's culture significantly determines the degree of success an improvement strategy will realize. Pre-examining the culture allows the leadership to shape its improvement plans in a way that will first shift the culture. SPN's research shows that an effective way to do that is to include teachers in discussions around "why change" before suggesting "what" and "how" to improve.

The WE Teach and WE Learn surveys provide the qualitative data that helps educators explore the question, *Why change?* Analyzing the parallel student-teacher items provides a platform or a starting point for teachers and leaders to discuss the data and explore the reasons behind it. The examples provided in this report will illustrate how any gaps or misalignments indicated by survey data can be used to help generate constructive questions, reflection, challenges, and discussions with staff and can inform the questions of "what" and "how" to improve a school's effectiveness.

## Using Data from Parallel Student-Teacher Items

The following survey items and results have been excerpted directly from national data collected from WE Teach and WE Learn surveys from 2008 through 2013. The items selected for analysis are examples from each of the four major categories of the survey: rigor, relevance, relationships, and leadership.

### Rigor: Re-Teaching

TQ38. I spend too much time re-teaching what students should already know.	44.9%
LQ52. My teachers are teaching me things I already know.	47.0%

## Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

The aggregated comparative data shows that teachers and students pretty much agree on the amount of re-teaching that takes place in the classroom. Potentially informative questions raised by the data are:

- Is there as much re-teaching as teachers and students perceive?
- Why is there a need to re-teach so much?
- Why are teachers re-teaching to all students something that many students know?
- Are teachers re-teaching something that is important to reinforce or something that is necessary for students to show proficiency on a test?

These questions in response to the data can help education professionals understand more deeply instructional issues and seek out solutions, such as differentiated instruction and formative assessments to provide timely data on what students know to help all students achieve at high levels.

### Rigor: Rigorous Work

TQ33. If students are given more challenging work, they do it.	52.0%
LQ15. If I were given more challenging work in class, I would do it.	54.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

Apparently, students' and teachers' perceptions of accepting challenging work are about the same. About half of the teachers feel as though more challenging work is necessary and students would meet the challenge. It is evident that the students believe they not only want, but also can meet the challenge as well. The key question is: What defines "more challenging" work? Rigorous work requires students to think in a much deeper way about the content and its relevance. The issue, therefore, is to understand the capabilities of each student and then challenge her or him appropriately with assignments, tasks, and problems. Students can also gain confidence when they are asked to meet higher expectations, especially when the threat of grades is downplayed. This kind of intrinsic motivation helps students to meet the demands of higher order thinking. The opportunity, therefore, is to create learning conditions that build confidence and stimulate greater achievement.

#### Rigor: State Assessments

TQ37. I am expected to make students passing the state test my number one priority.	49.3%
LQ21. Passing the state test is the most important thing I do in school.	64.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

Judging by the data, students feel more strongly about the importance of passing the state tests than teachers do. Nearly two-thirds of the students feel that way, but only about half of the teachers agree. Of course, not all subjects are state tested, and the data does not reflect the teacher evaluation systems that have since become a priority in many states. Still, this apparent disconnect is worth exploring. The opportunity that may present itself from such data is to look at how formative assessments and the process of continually monitoring learning can be embedded in instructional programs. If educators can build a system focused on a formative process, it will lead to student success on state assessments.

#### Rigor: High Expectations

TQ41. This school has high expectations for all students.	79.3%
LQ18. This school has high expectations for all students.	68.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

Such a response rate might cause observers to ask why only about two-thirds of students think their school has high expectations for ALL students. What about the rest of the students who need support through consistently high expectations? Why do a fifth of the teachers feel the school is not committed to high expectations for ALL students? Is this an indication that the culture expects some students not to succeed? How do teachers and school leaders develop a culture of high expectations and success for all students?

#### Rigor: Support for Student Learning

TQ25. Struggling and disengaged learners receive the support necessary to be successful.	65.7%
LQ24. When I struggle in class, I receive help.	68.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

This survey item may speak to the struggle between teaching the standards and teaching for the success of all students. About two-thirds of both teachers and students feel that teachers offer (and students can receive) help if needed. Such a result might prompt the question: What about the rest of the students who need support? A dynamic tension exists between covering the curriculum and giving attention to students who need more time or use different ways to learn the same content as others.

This can become problematic in a curriculum that is overly or primarily focused on high-achieving students. The opportunity that arises may be to think more about using instructional strategies that support varied learning styles and then having the structure and culture achieve that.

#### Relevance: Application to the Real World

TQ14. Students can apply what I am teaching to their everyday lives.	92.0%
LQ2. I can apply what I learn in my classes to my everyday life.	60.0%

#### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

With a 32% gap between teachers and students, there is a great deal to consider. If relevance is what engages students to learn at higher levels, have teachers been prepared for this challenge? Do they know what students consider to be applicable to everyday life? Is the curriculum so focused on rigor that relevance suffers? Tools such as the *Rigor/Relevance Framework* help guide teachers in the development of relevant applications of the knowledge and skills taught. The gap in perceptions should be a concern. Such a discrepancy is an opportunity to focus on how learning is made possible through relevance.

#### Relevance: Career Pathways

TQ26. I encourage students to explore career pathways.	76.5%
LQ40. My teachers make me aware of different career choices.	56.0%

#### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

A 20% gap between teachers and students around the topic of career exploration invites examination:

- Have teachers been made aware of rewarding and realistic career choices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- Do teachers and other staff encourage students to explore careers, and how?
- If only 56% of students feel they are made aware of career pathways, what about the other 44%? Are they the students who really need direction and encouragement?
- Is a lack of connection to future career aspirations why some students become bored in school?

All are helpful questions to ask about how and why relevance drives learning and if the school truly balances college AND career readiness.

#### Relationships: Caring

TQ11. Staff respects students.	89.3%
LQ5. My teachers care about me.	66.0%

#### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

Data on relationships describes how much students perceive that their teachers care about them as individuals. While 89% of the teachers surveyed say they respect students, only 66% of the students think teachers care about them—a significant discrepancy. Potentially, the other 34% of the students believe they lack this support. One response to such data could be to determine which students feel their teachers do not care about them. The challenge to nurture a true culture of caring in schools for ALL students is an opportunity to engage teachers in a meaningful discussion.

#### Relationships: Interpersonal Relationships as Part of the Culture

TQ35. My colleagues are a source of encouragement for me.	79.9%
LQ19. My classmates encourage me to do my best.	43.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

This comparison raises opportunities to reflect on the data. If four out of five teachers feel good about their relationships with each other, how do the rest of the teachers feel and why? The student data, on the other hand, indicates that fewer than half of the students perceive that other students encourage them. What about the other 57% and their relationships to the other students? In any work or learning environment, collaboration and support of each other should be nurtured, so a question to pose might be: What can we do as adults to build positive and supportive interpersonal relationships among students? Opportunities to build a culture that leads to the mutual support of all involved can enhance success rates for individual students and teachers. The culture is the sum of the parts of the population in a school.

#### Relationships: Academic Interests

TQ47. I know my students' academic interests and goals.	82.3%
LQ17. My teachers know my academic interests and goals.	42.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

The 40% gap in the data raises questions related to leadership and the goals of a school. Are teachers there to deliver a curriculum or to serve students by connecting their academic interests to the curriculum? Positive relationships with students is an important avenue to discovering their interests, so the questions to ask might involve discussing if the structures and strategies in the school are supportive of building these relationships or impediments to a culture of learning for ALL students.

#### Relationships: Self-Advocacy

TQ51. Students talk about academic problems and concerns with me.	82.0%
LQ22. I can share my academic problems and concerns with my teachers.	62.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

Self-advocacy is an integral part of supporting struggling students and students with learning challenges. Ideally they are encouraged to articulate their personal needs and how they best learn. Feeling comfortable approaching a teacher for help is an important disposition. Accustoming students to ask for help and then giving them the support they need to succeed leads to more positive relationships between students and teachers and therefore a more supportive school culture.

#### Relationships: Outside Interests

TQ59. I know what my students are passionate about.	79.6%
LQ47. My teachers know my interests outside of school.	30.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

The gap between teachers and students on this topic is staggering, especially because educators know from research and intuitively that being familiar with a student's interests outside of the classroom helps build connections that encourage student engagement and persistence in learning. Positive relationships with students can lead to knowing what is relevant for them and therefore how to help them learn. Making efforts to know their students' interests means teachers can develop education experiences that engage students in their learning.

#### Leadership: Purpose of School

TQ4. The school administration clearly communicates the goals of the school to staff.	76.1%
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LQ49. I know the goals my school is working on this year.	50.0%
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### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

When teachers don't have a clear understanding of the vision, goals and direction of their school, leadership's task becomes more challenging. Questions (*e.g.*, Why? What? How?) and data about shared beliefs and mission are important information sources for leaders, staff, and stakeholders. Collaboration, involvement, and self-investment are integral parts of school culture. Leadership should not be vested in a single person or role, but should involve everyone in building the school's purpose within an agreed-upon framework. Collaborative and shared leadership is an opportunity deserving of being examined, understood, established, and sustained. The student data indicates that 50% of the students know the goals of the school. For the other 50% we need to explore questions such as: What can we as a school do to involve more students in leadership responsibilities? How is student involvement in developing school goals tied to motivation and investment in that school? How do student involvement and awareness in school goals help them achieve at high levels?

### Leadership: Collaborative Environment

TQ52. Teachers have adequate opportunity to contribute to school-wide decisions.	50.6%
LQ14. Students are involved in school-wide decisions.	41.0%

### Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

This data set speaks to perceptions about whether the school maintains a collaborative culture. For example, if only half of the teachers feel they contribute to decisions in the school, the other half quite possibly do not. The challenge is to get all — or at least the vast majority — of teachers and other staff involved and invested in school decision making, so the goals become part of the culture for everyone, not just some. Similarly, it appears that a majority of students see school as a place they just “come to,” not a place in which they are invested and involved, at least to some level, in decision making and building a positive culture. Teacher and student perceptions — and therefore attitudes — about collaboration, empowerment, and involvement within a school are worthy of examination, because they are key ingredients in creating a supportive and positive school culture.

### Using Survey Data as a Roadmap to a Positive School Culture

The aggregated national data over seven years and from hundreds of thousands of administrations of the WE Surveys is rich in meaning and potential value. Studied in its entirety, it clearly identifies what seem to be commonly occurring and broadly held differences in the perceptions of teachers and students, a few of which were described in this report. For example, statistically speaking, there are likely to be differences between student and teacher perceptions of how much teachers are aware of students' personal as well as academic interests, the extent to which teachers make learning relevant, how students compared to teachers perceive the emphasis placed in classrooms on career exploration and test preparation, and how well teachers believe that school leaders communicate their school's goals. These statistically frequent gaps may or may not occur in survey results for an individual school, but the national data can productively inform discussion and analysis. Moreover, districts and schools have used their data to measure and monitor progress towards alignment of perceptions over time.

To succeed at keeping schools meaningful and effective, school leaders need to think about the types of affective/“soft” data presented through this qualitative lens. Doing so can improve learning for students, so they are prepared to be sent into the future to meet the emerging demands in work and life. The following list can serve as a guide for thinking about what education should provide to students.

- Creating a collaborative environment will make all involved feel they are a vital part of decision making and invested in the vision, goals, and actions of the school community.
- Relationships, relationships, relationships! Knowing about and respecting the uniqueness of individuals is the best way possible to support both adults and students.
- What is relevant today may not be relevant in the future. Continuing to grow and learn about what is relevant to students and staff and how it connects to education in our schools will enhance learning and performance.
- Almost everyone is leadership-capable to some degree. Finding out what that is for each person and allowing him or her to show leadership is essential in a positive school culture.
- Using all of the above to develop rigorous learning environments that engage students and teachers in caring and respectful relationships is stimulating and builds trust.

What matters most, of course, is what the situation is in *your* school. The WE Surveys are a means to engage students, staff, and stakeholders in constructive discussions about the current culture in the school and how to nurture a culture that helps provide greater opportunities for students. The more a school focuses on a balanced culture that includes the elements of rigor, relevance, relationships, and leadership, the greater the results will be for our children and their future.

For more information on administering the WE Surveys in your school or district, visit [info@spnet.us](mailto:info@spnet.us).