

# Making Student Surveys Matter in MSAD #72

How Maine School Administrative District #72 uses student surveys to improve teaching and learning.

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## About MSAD #72

- Serves 2,000 students
- Three Elementary and one Middle School
- Based in Fryeburg, Maine, near the New Hampshire border

*Maine School Administrative District #72 (MSAD #72) is a small, rural district centered on the town of Fryeburg, near the border with New Hampshire. It serves about two thousand students in grades K-8. For the last two years, MSAD #72 has done student surveys to better understand students' classroom experiences and to support their district strategic plan. We spent a day with teachers, principals, and the superintendent of the district to hear about how they are using their student survey results to take action and make change.*

## The Value of Student Surveys

Jay Robinson, the superintendent of schools in MSAD #72, and a former middle school principal and teacher, believes that listening to and learning from students is a critical part of shaping the school and classroom experiences that students deserve. "If we're not having conversations with students, we're missing the most important piece of engaging with them. Students are very perceptive—you can't fool them!"

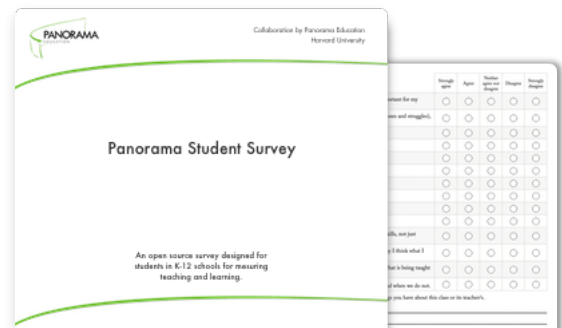
In 2014, the state of Maine issued legislation that mandated that student achievement be used as a "significant factor," along with professional practice standards, in evaluating teaching efficacy. The mandate also included an optional component of using learner perceptions in evaluating teaching efficacy. While this initiative is still in the pilot phase, Jay and his team at MSAD #72 decided to collect data from their third through eighth graders on teaching and learning in the district. But instead of using the data to support teacher evaluations, the data would be used for formative purposes: only Jay himself and teachers would see the feedback from their students, with principals receiving the data later in the process. MSAD #72 also committed to administering surveys to students twice each year, so that they could track progress over time and provide teachers with progress indicators.



“Asking for feedback more than once over the course of the year is integral to the process for us. The data becomes a formative tool, as you have baseline data and then can set goals for growth,” Jay shared. Emphasizing the formative value of collecting student perception data, Jay and his leadership team asked the functional committee of faculty and staff that were responsible for creating MSAD #72’s teacher-evaluation model to give feedback on survey samples.

Ultimately, they helped chose survey content from the [Panorama Student Survey](#), which allowed the district to use a valid and reliable instrument without spending time or energy creating one themselves. Working closely with a group of faculty and staff to design the teacher-evaluation model helped cement buy-in for the process. “It was absolutely critical for us to have teachers be on board with the survey,” Jay explained. Teachers were encouraged to use the data they received from the student perception surveys to set professional growth goals and to have conversations with their students.

At the district level, Jay and the leadership team wanted to learn about a few high-level issues: whether students on the whole felt supported and engaged by their teachers, whether the district’s shift towards student-centered learning had been a positive change for students, and whether there were larger growth areas for the district as a whole.



*MSAD #72 used questions on the Panorama Student Survey to measure topics like Teacher-Student Relationships and Student Engagement.*

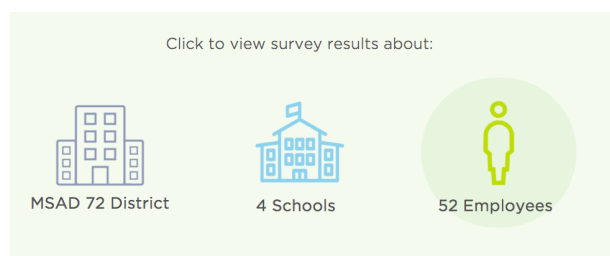
Jay was also curious to learn more about whether there were differences in how students experienced the various literacy programs in the district. The data that MSAD #72 collected from students with the [Panorama Student Survey](#) was used to learn about several aspects of the MSAD #72 strategic plan, and to support the rollout or evaluation of a number of programs.

Jay’s vision for how student surveys will be used in MSAD #72 is ambitious. “I think student surveys are going to become a critical part of the way we do business, an integral and evolving part of students’ and teachers’ lives in the classroom. We want to change our district culture, and that comes from helping everyone feel comfortable speaking to and engaging with each other about what’s working and what could be stronger.”

## Learning from Data

Jay's first reaction when he saw the data was that it aligned with his expectations. "The data confirmed a lot of things that we felt at a gut level, and clarified a lot of things that we knew. But we didn't have the mechanism to measure it, and you can't represent data anecdotally." Having data from our students lent a lot of credibility to what we suspected."

Principals in MSAD #72, too, felt that the data reflected what they were seeing in their classrooms. Terri Mahanor, Principal of Brownfield Denmark Elementary School, shared that "the data aligned with what we're seeing in the classroom, but it's important to tease out what's happening to learn whether it's something unique to this group of students, or if it's something that we're doing. Long-term, we want to be able to track issues over time, and make improvements to our whole school and district culture."



*Teachers and principals in MSAD #72 received reports that allowed them to learn about the quality of teacher-student relationships in individual classrooms and at each school.*

For teachers in MSAD #72, receiving the data from their students was an interesting and often powerful experience. Cyndi Broyer, a fourth and fifth grade teacher, was curious to learn more about her students' social-emotional learning skills, and wanted to confirm that her students felt well-supported in her class. "Relationships are so critical to learning," she shared, "The data is useful to me because it lets me learn more about whether my class feels connected to me or not."

Courtney Smith, another fourth and fifth grade teacher in the district, was also curious to learn more about how her students experienced their relationship with her. She facilitated a conversation with her students after receiving her data. "I had a meeting with my students in which I asked them for ideas for me about what I could do to improve, and what I should continue doing. They had lots of ideas—and wanted to tell me about what they felt was working and what wasn't." Having more information about how connected her students felt to her was also "helpful. I loved seeing the feedback and data, because you spend a long time building relationships, and you want to make sure that it's working." Learning from her students about their perceptions of their relationship with her was "at the core of what I needed to know—other issues mattered less to me."

Courtney and Cyndi both spoke to the fact that teachers had conversations about the data "casually and in passing" with each other about what they were seeing. Each of the four schools in the district is thinking about what formal opportunities for professional development make sense moving forward, so that teachers can discuss results together and come up with school-level next steps.

After surveys were administered, principals and teachers noticed students having conversations about taking the surveys. “Kids talked about it,” Terri explained, “and those conversations helped us learn more about the data. It helped us ask them what made them feel supported.”

Jay summed up the experience of receiving the data by describing that “Having this data is helping our teachers to honor students’ voices and make connections. The more we learn from and about our kids, the more informed our conversations are.”

### Using Data to Establish Goals

One of the most important ways that teachers in the district used the data was to set professional goals. Sue Voinche, a long-serving special education teacher in MSAD #72, was initially skeptical of the value of student surveys. “I never had much confidence in student surveys,” she shrugged.

“And then I started looking at some of the things that my students said, and I thought, oh my god, they’re right! It really bothered me that I wasn’t doing some of the things that they identified as being missing from my teaching. This year, I wrote one of my goals about what they said in the survey. It’s the first time I’ve used student feedback to write one of my teaching goals.”

Cyndi Broyer had a similar experience. “Seeing the feedback from last year was powerful,” she said. “After seeing it, I wrote down my goals about making sure that ALL of my students feel supported and connected to me.”



*Principals at MSAD #72 discuss their reflections about using the survey data during a leadership meeting.*

While teachers weren’t required to share their results with principals or the leadership team in the district, many chose to, as part of their goal-setting. Jay personally had many conversations with teachers about their results. “Teachers showed us the data voluntarily,” he said, “and a lot of them were surprised by some of the things that their students shared. When we did the next round of surveys, a lot of them had made positive changes to their practice, and the results reflected that. They’re cultivating a growth mindset about their results.”



Jay, his leadership team, and a number of teachers also conducted interviews with students as part of following-up on their experiences in different programs and with the shift in curriculum to learner-centered classrooms. “These conversations help us understand students at a deeper level. Students definitely have preferences, and they want to have a voice and choice in what’s happening in the classroom.”

Overall, administrators and teachers in MSAD #72 agree that student surveys can be a powerful impetus for learning more about student experiences and for setting personal, classroom-level goals as well as school- and district-level goals.

Terri Mahanor describes perception data from students as “one of the most powerful change agents out there—it’s a way to demonstrate that teachers care about students. Hearing from their students matters more to teachers than hearing from evaluators.”



*To learn more about MSAD #72 and how they’re using student perception data, [watch](#) Jay Robinson talk about the value of student surveys.*

For Jay, collecting student perception feedback is critical to his vision of success in MSAD #72. “As we move forward, we want the message to students to be: ‘Your feedback is valued, wanted, essential.’ For teachers, engaging with their students about how they’re learning and what could be better is a daily conversation. We want to be able to tap into what’s happening in our students’ heads. Collecting this data helps us do that.”

## Key Takeaways

- ➔ Work with teachers to get buy-in about survey content and give information about how and why surveys will be administered well in advance
- ➔ Share results with teachers before administrators, to demonstrate that data will be used for formative (rather than evaluative) purposes
- ➔ Administer surveys more than once a year so that teachers and administrators have baseline data to refer to when they consider goal-setting
- ➔ Make use of school- and district-level data in setting focus areas for whole school or district professional development



- ➡ Have teachers focus on one area of particular interest to them as they set professional goals
- ➡ Use change over time data to track progress towards goals
- ➡ Encourage teachers to have conversations with their class about the results and what changes could be made in the classroom
- ➡ Leverage school- and district-level aggregated data to have follow-up focus groups or conversations with students and staff about what they notice, and what changes they would like to see
- ➡ Consider major findings from the data when writing or reviewing strategic plans

## About Panorama Education

Panorama Education partners with schools, districts, charter networks, and state departments of education to design and implement survey programs for students, families, and teachers. Panorama offers a technology platform to support survey administration and create reports that are clear, actionable, and, most importantly, help teachers and administrators improve their schools. Panorama currently runs survey programs in over 6,500 schools in 35 states, including those in the Connecticut State Department of Education, San Francisco Unified School District, Dallas Independent School District and Teach for America.