

Acting on Students' Unfiltered Views of Their Schooling

BY JILL A. BAKER

Students have so much to teach us. Two years ago, when Long Beach Unified School District began administering a survey to assess students' social-emotional development and well-being, I knew we would learn a lot about their experiences in our schools and the world around them. Building on a past practice of administering an annual school culture and climate survey, we launched a pulse survey (a short questionnaire to continuously measure feedback as part of a listening program), to be conducted three times a year.

This aligned with my superintendent goals, elevating social-emotional development to a status previously reserved for academic achievement. While the evidence supporting this approach is not new, our use of data for districtwide improvement was a new undertaking.

The school district's pulse survey provides teachers and administrators with a better understanding of students' sense of identity, belonging and agency. This understanding aims to improve classroom and school experiences and positively impact student outcomes

with student voice as the driver of change.

Taking Student Pulse

As a superintendent, I recognize the clear importance of student voice. Recently, I have witnessed its impact through shadowing students in our system, facilitating student focus groups to gather qualitative data and engaging with my 35-member superintendent student advisory committee. Consequently, I was thrilled when our board of education adopted Vision 2035: Education Reimagined in LBUSD in July 2023, with one of its core values being Centering Student Needs and Voice.

In order to experience firsthand how the pulse survey could be used to improve student learning and experience, I embarked on my own yearlong learning journey. Through a structured lunch meeting (yes, there was food!) with a highly diverse group of 20-25 students



Jill Baker

at each high school, I immersed myself in each site's pulse survey data alongside students who had taken the survey. I facilitated an opportunity for students to analyze their site's data, highlight strengths and areas for improvement and collectively challenge and consider aloud what they saw in the data.

During each visit, I was struck by what students saw in the data that differed from my

adult/superintendent perspective. They readily identified what not to worry about and quickly highlighted the daily challenges they faced that required action. The meeting agenda also gave students an opportunity to dream and contribute to the development of a new graduate portrait.

The conclusion of each lunch meeting was an opportunity to stand and "circle up," providing feedback to me about the process they had engaged in. What students expressed in

RSVP @ IN PERSON MEETINGS
SAMPLE REPORT
IDENTITY, AGENCY & SENSE OF BELONGING
 One of the focus areas of RSVP is discussing identity, agency and belonging as a part of LBUSD's work on Social-Emotional Learning.

PULSE SURVEY DATA (SEPT. 2022)

Agency	86%
Belonging	81%
Identity	72%

STUDENT VOICES
 Pulse Survey- Student Reflections

"If there is a disagreement with an adult, I feel that I can discuss it with them and not be ignored or disrespected."
 "I appreciate being treated with respect and listened to."
 "Students are happy to be a part of the school!"

Student Ideas

- I think we need different electives...we need more to discover new things.
- We should explore an expanded passing period.
- Schools can provide more support and check-ins for underrepresented and struggling groups.
- Have more colleges come to our school and have more trips to colleges.
- I think more check-ins would benefit students, especially when there is a lot of non-school issues in our personal life.

Ideal Supportive Adults...

- Are empathetic and compassionate to students with disabilities and mental health challenges.
- Teachers will need to be more mindful of student life (ex. some of us work outside of school).
- A growth mindset should be possessed by adults

Student Reps:

In Long Beach, Calif., a student advisory committee called Raising Student Voices and Participation meets monthly to share their insights with Superintendent Jill Baker.

our closing circle often left me speechless. The experience activated their sense of identity, belonging and agency in ways I could not have imagined. Following each lunch meeting, a summary of student reflections and ideas was created and shared with each school's administration.

The school district's core value of Centering Student Needs and Voice states, "We believe that incorporating student voice and building student agency, so that students can intentionally influence their own circumstances, are essential to our success in understanding and meeting each student's needs."

When I reflect on my experience engaging with my student advisory committee, which the members asked to name RSVP, or Raising Student Voices and Participation, on the topics of identity, belonging and agency, I know it was time well spent. It served as a tremendous learning opportunity for me and set the stage for our schools' use of the pulse

survey data to improve classroom and school experiences and positively impact student outcomes.

Student-Centered Action

Over the last year, schools have embraced the use of their survey data in new ways: inviting students as presenters at staff meetings, featuring students as panelists to share their experiences with staff, convening student focus groups to talk about disparities revealed in the school-specific data and creating action plans to make significant changes.

As a superintendent, my heart is full. While it is often more comfortable and sometimes more efficient to make changes based on our own understanding, I have learned repeatedly that empathy and a user-centered approach lead to much greater clarity and deeper degrees of change. Our students have so much to teach us if we simply create spaces where they have a seat at the table alongside us to share their insights and voice.

JILL BAKER is superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District in Long Beach, Calif. E-mail: jbaker@lbschools.net

COURTESY OF LONG BEACH, CALIF., UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT