

Planning your surveys

What should I ask about in the first survey?

For some staff, the first survey is the first opportunity they've had in a while to share their thoughts. This means it can elicit a flood of comments, ideas, and pent-up frustrations. For this reason, we suggest including the positive, free response question.

In most schools, the concerns which emerge most frequently are around behaviour, communication and wellbeing. So it may make sense to focus questions around these topics.

How can I plan the questions I'm going to ask?

It's fine to ask about whatever is interesting, relevant or on your mind. However, longer-term, there seems to be value in focusing on specific topics. Sam Crome, deputy head at St Peter's Catholic School, describes it as *"really important to go through the bank of questions initially and plot out throughout the year when you might ask certain questions. For example, asking a question about marking and feedback during mock season might be a bad move. It's good to look at your calendar and cross reference it with the Teacher Tapp bank of questions and categories and say, this would be a sensible time to ask this kind of question."*

This might mean having:

- **A schedule for the year.** A school could plan to tackle topics at particular times of year. For example, it might look to cover behaviour in Autumn Term 1, while setting up routines; look at wellbeing in December or January as staff wrestle with tiredness and darkness, and look at professional development in the summer, while planning the next year's provision. This can then become a routine: Autumn 1 is always the time the school looks at behaviour, so it can track change over time.
- **Before and after.** A school could focus on a topic as a baseline to guide the development of a policy or plan. For example, it might assess how good behaviour is, how long marking is taking, or how clear staff perceive communication as. The school could then revisit the questions a term later to test the impact of the new policy: what has worked, and what more is needed?

Headteacher Andy Hencken describes **three ways** he has planned what to ask:

1. Letting staff vent

The feedback isn't about you. It's feedback to the school. This has started to influence me on the questions that I'm putting in the next survey. It's now a question of 'Where do I think pressure is building?' Allowing people to vent is going to release that pressure, and that catharsis is hugely important. It's important to let people get it off their chest, no matter how raw it might be the first time we read it – it will make them feel better if they think there's likely a positive outcome from it.

2. Timing surveys for the low point

I always do it at a time when everyone says 'Why would you survey the staff then? They're on their knees!' I don't really want to have the fluffy Disney version: the first day back after a two week break. That's less real than the: we're two weeks from the end of term, covering for an absent colleague the last month, with a marking backlog – I'd rather know what it's like at the trip point, than at the high point.

3. Developing a rhythm in using surveys

A lot of the benefit of this is that I want to pick out the big issues, not the individual minute detail that impacts on one department or one person. I want to know, are there too many meetings? Are there too many emails? It's about pulling out two or three real big highlights and saying 'These are what we think the largest proportion of you have highlighted as a priority.' I'll always have a couple of opportunities for open questions – but the important bit is the big picture.

Linking the survey to wider school activity

Sam Crome is Deputy Head of St Peter's Catholic School in Guildford. He's been using school surveys since January 2022. He invites fellow school leaders to consider "How does Teacher Tapp fit into what you're doing as a school? These are interesting, insightful bits of data you're getting from staff, so how can it inform what you do as a school?" This is how he's used the responses:

Surveys are part of a wider effort

School Surveys are one of many ways to improve wellbeing, workload and general work conditions. We wanted to use the surveys as part of a wider plan to use focus groups, to put it

into our school development plan and to use the feedback. We've used the record of what we've done, based on feedback, to make a wellbeing charter. It's very much a working document, in which we're trying to write down the things we do as a school to look after the staff.

Bring together

I've invited a group of people to form a wellbeing group. We'll meet once a half term. The group will be solution and action-focused, committed to working on school improvement. I'm going to bring along the key feedback, and I'm hoping that that group can then collaborate on what the survey results are saying and come up with an action plan. Eventually I'd like them to be the ones presenting in front of the staff about what we're working on as a school, so it's not me standing up again.

For example, our first survey this year just came back, and five or six people mentioned communication. We've made a real effort, we've changed our briefing structure, I feel like everything we do is better for communication, but it's still coming up on the survey. So I want to say to them, can we put our heads together and work out what is it about communication that we can do better?

Dig... and concerns diminish

Every half term I run a staff forum, or focus group, and I tried to focus on one specific thing that we'd heard a lot about in the surveys. Often, once you invite people to come along and talk about things in person, you get less take up than you think you might. In some surveys, teachers mentioned they were finding parent communication difficult. I ran a forum just on that, based on the survey data. But I only had two members of staff turn up to that one.

We had a few surveys where people flagged up meetings. We said 'Meetings have come up a lot: could you please just reply to this email being more specific about what we can do about the meetings.' Again, hardly anyone replied or engaged. I went around and tried to whip up a bit of interest. But often, you find when you interrogate it a bit more, someone might write something quite flippant and not really have that much to say about it. So sometimes when you're reading, you're thinking 'Oh my gosh, this is really negative.' You have to contextualise it, that people might be sitting at the end of their day, and they write something flippantly. And when you interrogate it further, it might not be as big a problem as you first think.



-  schoolsurveys.com
-  hello@schoolsurveys.com
-  Education Intelligence, c/o BHP, 2 Rutland Park, Sheffield, S10 2PD



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