

What School Leaders Really Need to Know – and Why They Don't Ask

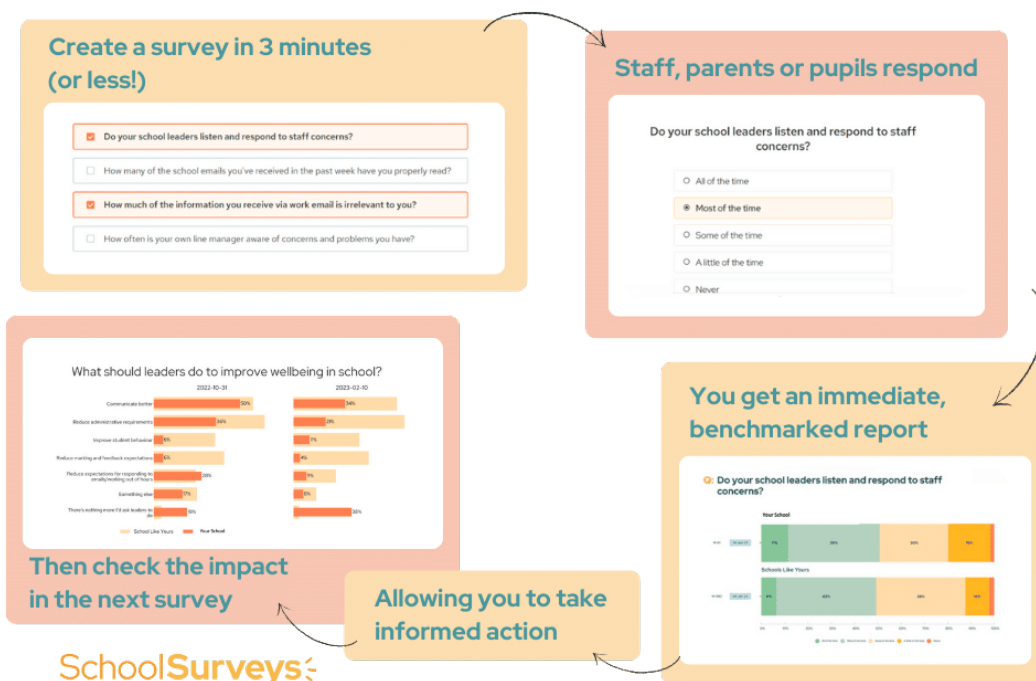
By Laura McInerney

Over the years we've asked teachers around 7000 questions on [Teacher Tapp](#) – our daily survey. Through that time, leaders often wrote and said they wanted to survey their staff and compare answers to the national.

To help with that, we created [School Surveys](#) which leaders can use to survey their staff (and parents, and pupils) to see how their thinking compares to other schools.

We've now been running it for roughly two years and in that time, we've noticed which questions are appealing for school leaders to ask – evidenced by which ones are asked repeatedly – and which languish unselected.

Staff, parent and pupil voice – the easy way



An overlooked question

One question which isn't asked very often is, in Teacher Tapp, one of the most powerful.

It's this: "My manager has realistic expectations of me".

Since we first started surveying in 2017 this question has been one of the most highly correlated with a teacher's level of illness and feelings about leaving. Where people feel the expectations on them are too high, and they are constantly failing to do a good job, they only have one of three options: become comfortable with doing badly, feel terrible all the time, or leave.

Frankly, none of these is a good option. Where teachers become accustomed to doing badly, why would they try and improve their practice anymore? Feeling terrible all the time is no better - and may contribute to why people are sick more often. Which only leaves the option of walking out the door. Something else we don't want in a teacher shortage.

Why don't people ask it more?

A simple reason why leaders may not ask this question is that we haven't adequately communicated that it's a crucial one.

We have around 300 questions on School Surveys, and many focus on specific areas of school improvement: behaviour, planning, and special needs. Many leaders make powerful use of these questions and use the surveys to focus on these areas and change practices. So there's no reason they might have picked this innocuous question, and in our quest to help them focus, we haven't explained its power.

Let me rectify that now: it's powerful!

The second reason why people may not ask it is because they don't want to know the outcome. Getting feedback is painful. We hear this a lot from the school leaders who use our Surveys. It's not always nice to learn that a third of your staff think management expectations are too high!

Yet, that would be a promising finding! Around 45% of teachers on Teacher Tapp think their managers' expectations are too high. If only a third of yours think this, you're doing great!

Furthermore, even if you were to learn the figure was much worse than the benchmark, it doesn't mean that you are the cause of the problem. Each school context is different and goes through different issues at different times. For example, many teachers think it must be great to work in school graded Outstanding by Ofsted. A sure mark of quality. That expectation can be very stressful, however. Especially if things have become more challenging in recent years for things outside the school's control: maybe the demographics changed, or you lost some key staff and have struggled to replace them. It's very easy for expectations that one year were reasonable to suddenly feel unmanageable.

Knowing that people feel the expectations are unreasonable doesn't necessarily mean they are, nor that you as a leader can change them. But it can nod you towards where a problem might be and that you may need to plan for more turnover. Alternatively, you may also find from the survey that things aren't as bad as you thought. (We also hear this a lot from leaders who've read their surveys!)

A single simple question

If you haven't yet embraced staff surveys, why not start with this question through a simple platform like Teams or a Google Form?

The national average shows 56% of staff find expectations realistic, leaving 44% who do not – a useful benchmark for any school leader. Of course, that number varies in all kinds of contexts. In School Surveys, we provide benchmarks based on our data from schools like yours, so it's really accurate.

Whether you start small or go all in with School Surveys, we're eager to support your journey towards a better understanding of your staff's needs. And of course, we'd love to hear your feedback if you decide to ask this important question!

If you'd like to find out more and want to get in touch, you can speak to one of us [here](#).