

The hidden costs of free surveys: why investing in specialist survey tools pays off for schools

Leaders sometimes ask us why it's worth working with a specialist survey provider, rather than running surveys using a free platform. Given the financial pressures schools face, it would be worrying if leaders weren't asking this! But we think there are important things specialists can offer which schools and trusts can't easily do themselves.

Our number one goal is for leaders to know what staff, parents and pupils are thinking. This helps leaders work in a more informed and effective way. They can do this in many different ways: with a specialist provider, a free platform, or even pen and paper.

Other goals support this goal. It can be hard for leaders to know what to ask. It can be time-consuming to create a survey – even more so to analyse it. We want leaders to be able to gather the information they need as quickly, efficiently and insightfully as possible. Leaders are busy: if administering and analysing surveys becomes a chore, they're unlikely to do so regularly. This robs them of the insight they need.

So, while we're always happy to hear that leaders have an existing survey routine, we think there are a few ways specialist providers, like School Surveys, can help.

Making analysis quicker and easier

We've talked to schools where leaders spend days fighting Excel to get survey results analysed. We've talked to trusts where it can take weeks.

There are many disadvantages to this. First, that time has a cost – and while it's not directly accounted for in the budget, it is time that a deputy head, school business manager, or trust HR team is not doing something else. Second, one of the great advantages of a survey is that it allows leaders to gain rapid feedback (something we discussed in [a previous post](#)). If you're waiting a week or longer for the results, it's much harder to use it promptly. Third, the more surveys you run, and the bigger your organisation, the more these problems grow.

Specialist providers can overcome these problems. For example, our survey platform is custom-built to allow leaders to create and distribute a survey very quickly (it takes leaders three minutes, on average). More importantly, we do the analysis for you! We create a chart for every question. Not just that, we show the splits you need to make informed decisions: how do teachers and support staff respond differently? How do Year 7 respond differently to

Year 8? If you repeat a question, you don't have to dig through past reports – we'll create a chart showing how things have changed over time. And there's no waiting around: our system creates these reports automatically, as soon as the survey has closed.

You may want to play around with the data (you can access the raw data at the click of a button). But if you want to know what staff, pupils and parents think, identify what needs to happen – and get on with making those changes, a specialist provider may help.

Offering insightful questions

It's hard to write good questions. (Having written thousands of questions for Teacher Tapp over the years, we probably feel this more acutely than anyone!) It can be hard to know what to ask, too. Leaders often worry about unknown unknowns: things that they're not aware of when framing a question, for example. There's always a fear of unintentionally influencing responses.

The School Surveys question bank includes 500+ questions which we've painstakingly collated and organised. We've drawn on research, our teaching, leadership and governance experience, and on questions suggested by schools we work with in order to comprehensively cover all aspects of school life. Leafing through the dozens of topics available (or the question search function), you can take inspiration from all sorts of places. Since all staff survey questions go out through Teacher Tapp, we've also stress-tested them with thousands of teachers. If they perceive a slant in the question or an option that's missing, they tell us. That means we can offer School Surveys questions which we know work.

This means leaders can reliably take inspiration from the questions we offer – and use them with confidence.

Signalling interest and honesty

Finally, working with a specialist provider signals a couple of important things. First, it acts as a guarantee to respondents that their results are genuinely anonymous (we covered the importance of achieving this in [a previous post](#)). Second, in schools where relationships between leaders and staff (or parents, or pupils) aren't everything we would wish, it sends a message that leaders care what the school thinks, and are willing to invest to listen to it.

Conclusion

If we could only persuade you of one thing, it would be that regular surveys are an invaluable tool for school and trust leader.

But if you're persuaded of that, we'd suggest thinking about how best to do this. In some circumstances, a homemade approach may work well. But the bigger your school or trust, the busier you are, the deeper you want to dig, and the more you want to show you care, the more likely it is that it's worth talking to a survey provider.

If you'd like to talk to us about what a specialist provider can do to help, [get in touch](#).

Key takeaways

Knowing what staff, parents and pupils are really thinking helps leaders make better-informed decisions.

This can be achieved in many ways, but specialist providers:

- Save time in creating and particularly analysing surveys
- Provide expertly-designed and stress-tested questions
- Signal that leaders want to listen to staff