

Making sense of school surveys through benchmarks

Imagine a leadership team meeting the results of a recent staff survey. Leaders review the headline figures, and trying to make sense of them.

They look at wellbeing questions and find 69% of staff say they're happy. They turn to behaviour: 40% of staff have seen students using phones, and 76% have seen students going the wrong way down one-way corridors. Moving on to staff views about the leadership team's efforts, 72% of staff say leaders are doing enough to support behaviour. Leaders begin discussing the results, but struggle to agree on their significance. Should they be pleased or concerned that 69% of staff are content? If 72% of staff think leaders are doing enough to support behaviour, should leaders redouble their efforts or pat themselves on the back?

Finding out what staff think, and what they've seen, is fairly easy. Establishing what these answers mean is much harder.

The value of benchmarking survey results

This is where benchmarks come in handy. Take the wellbeing results. Some aspects of school life are challenging, wherever you work. Trying to manage the learning of thirty different students at once is intrinsically difficult: each student knows, likes and wants different things. But schools can make teaching easier or harder: supportive leaders, help with behaviour management and reasonable policies makes a big difference.

Benchmarks allow leaders to distinguish between the challenges facing all schools and the challenges facing this particular school. For example, if 50% of staff nationally say they're content, and 69% of our staff say they're content, we can be fairly happy that we're doing something right. Things out of leaders' control (pay, Ofsted, exams) make 100% satisfaction almost impossible to achieve. Being above average suggests that leaders are solving most of the things they can address (for example, around behaviour and workload). If, instead, 69% of our staff said they were content, but the national benchmark was 80%, this would be cause to worry and look more closely at the concerns staff are raising.

(Clearly, schools shouldn't simply rest on their laurels when they exceed national benchmarks. But leaders do deserve a sense of achievement when they do!)

What makes a good benchmark?

A good benchmark has two crucial qualities:

1. 1) It's from a similar context. For example, if I'm leading a primary school serving a relatively deprived student intake, a national average doesn't tell me much (let alone a benchmark from a bunch of secondary schools). I want to be able to compare how my staff are doing compared to staff in similar situations, facing similar challenges.
2. 2) It's representative. Any benchmark must reflect the views of the underlying population it's meant to represent, not just a small handful of people. A benchmark made up of responses from primaries similar to mine may be welcome: but if it comes from just 27 responses across ten schools, it can hardly be deemed a national picture.

Most survey providers offer benchmarks. It's always worth checking how similar the schools you're benchmarked against are to you, and how representative they are of the national picture.

How School Surveys benchmarks

School Surveys draws on a unique dataset – the Teacher Tapp national panel. Every day, over 10,000 teachers respond to the survey questions Teacher Tapp poses. Panel members share a few key bits of information, including the school they work at, their role, and what they teach. This allows us to weight the responses from our panel so that it's nationally representative, something no other education survey provider can do. (It also allows us to compare the results we get with those from other national datasets, such as the School Workforce Census.)

The size of the Teacher Tapp panel (10,000+) also allows us to provide benchmarks for similar schools. Schools using our surveys receive results benchmarked nationally to schools from the same phase and the same Free School Meals quartile. So leaders can see how their teachers' responses compare to those of teachers serving a similar group of students. (We can also provide benchmark for special and alternative provision schools, and for private schools.)

Conclusion

Data is meaningless without context. To interpret survey results, leaders need both the results and a benchmark against which to judge them. A good benchmark comes from a similar population and is representative of that population. Through our unique Teacher Tapp national panel, School Surveys is able to provide these benchmarks. To find out more, [get in touch](#).

Key takeaways:

- To interpret survey results, leaders need benchmarks
- Good benchmarks come from similar populations and are representative of that population
- Teacher Tapp data allows School Surveys to provide these benchmarks