

BILL & MELINDA
GATES foundation

Sign up to receive updates from the Gates Found

SIGN U

Email Updates About

Impatient Optimists

— Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation —

Topics ▾

Countries ▾

Languages ▾

Authors ▾



MAY 06, 2016

A FONT
SIZE

PRINT

AUTH

To Show Teachers Appreciation, We Can Start By Listening

GAVIN PAYNE

May 06, 2016

“Find that really delicate balance of listening to feedback – hearing it and responding to it without losing sight of what you are trying to accomplish.” – Dr. Deborah Gist, Tulsa Public Schools Superintendent

Tweet

81

Like

“We have to listen to the people in the field about how we pace the work.” – Dr. Lillian Lowery, former MD State Superintendent

Throughout this series of conversations with education leaders we’ve heard them talk repeatedly about the importance of listening and the role it plays in being an effective leader.

Strong leaders know that listening to their stakeholders is not only good practice – as the famously taciturn former President Calvin Coolidge once quipped, “No man ever listened himself out of a job” – but listening is also an essential ingredient for developing good policy.

Good policy takes into account the perspectives, needs, and input of a range of stakeholders. In education, that means listening to parents, teachers, administrators and students to truly understand how the system is working for them and what they need to be successful. One way to get this type of input is by committing to consistent and meaningful engagement with these groups in direct conversation.

Another vehicle for understanding important perspectives is research – both qualitative and quantitative. Research, and surveys in particular, can provide a “big picture” view that allows us to see at scale, identify trends, and understand some of the nuances that exist between national and local dynamics.

For this post, I wanted to focus on one example, looking at one instance of how teachers are viewing their work and some of the major issues that impact work in the classroom.

This week, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) released [“Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices,”](#) a new report on teacher views and attitudes based on a 67-question survey. It is fitting that the release would fall during Teacher Appreciation Week. Joining me to unpack some of the findings and what messages they can send to policymakers is Maria Ferguson, CEP’s Executive Director.

Prior to joining CEP, Maria spent years working for organizations like the Alliance for Excellent Education and the National School Boards Association (NSBA), providing leadership and information on policy development.

Gavin Payne: Maria, thank you for joining me. It’s always exciting to dig into new data and unpack what it’s telling us. I’d love to hear some of the thinking behind this poll. Obviously, it’s always valuable to hear from teachers and better understand their perceptions about how policy is impacting their work in the classroom, but what was it about this moment in time that made CEP want to put out this poll?

Gavi
Pay

Gav
Pay
is
dire
of
U.S
Proq
Poli
and
Adv
at
the
Gat
Fou

@gp



DETA

Cateq

Educat

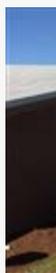
Topic

College
Ready
Educa
(U.S.)

RELA



Trit
to
Mr.
Gr:





Maria Ferguson: The last decade has brought so much debate to the education space, with the Common Core, testing, and the wait to re-authorize No Child Left Behind. There's so much at play right now. At CEP, we've spoken so often to state leaders and district leaders over the last four years related to the implementation of the Common Core standards that we felt like it was a good time to get a take from teachers. We knew that teachers would have a lot to say. And we knew that if we asked the right questions we would be able to create a well-rounded picture of the teacher experience, and I think we have done that.

GP: I think one of the most interesting findings from the poll is on the effects that uncertainty over policy decisions can have on teachers in the classroom. A majority of teachers who expressed uncertainty about the future of their state's current standards and assessments said that it presented a challenge to their teaching. In your view, what message is that sending to policymakers at both the state and district level?

MF: The uncertainty is a really troubling thing and I think that the constantly changing agenda makes what's already very challenging work, even harder. Education is local, we know this. It's a very political issue in this country. I think the uncertainty happens at times when education becomes a little bit of a "play thing" for politics. I think that has definitely been the case in the last decade, more so than I've ever seen in my career. Policymakers, even if they're well-intentioned, can be removed from the day in and day out of teaching and learning, and as a result they're making decisions in the abstract. It's very easy to forget that there are people out there trying to make all of this work. It's really important for policymakers to understand their actions and how they reverberate all the way down the line.

I also think there's an intersection there between both uncertainties in terms of agenda, and implementation chaos. I think it is very clear that teachers are feeling a little bit overwhelmed. There are a lot of demands being put on them, and there are a lot of things changing. To put it in simplest terms, it has been difficult for teachers to find a clear and consistent path forward to do their work.

GP: There is certainly a balance to be struck between ensuring that teachers have the autonomy they need in the classroom and providing appropriate direction on the policy side. The idea around creating this balance leads us right into the role and use of annual state assessments. This has been a controversial topic as of late – but your poll shows that more than two-thirds of math and English teachers are using data from annual assessments to inform their teaching. Clearly they see value. Why then does it get cited as a problem?

MF: The questions we asked about how teachers are using the assessments and the assessment data are the most complex questions in the survey to analyze. We ask those questions and when we get the answers back we have to analyze them very responsibly in terms of what the data show.

But I think when it comes to assessments, there are a lot more "inputs" at play than just the tests. There has been so much media attention on testing and the impact NCLB and its rigorous testing requirements had on teachers can't be over stated.

So, I think it's a fair caveat to say that teachers probably approached our questions about assessments with at least some of that noise in the background.

I think the simple answer is that there has been some considerable instability regarding state assessments over the last few years and I am not sure teachers feel entirely comfortable with the new tests yet even though they are using them to inform their teaching.

I think it's also important to look at the other data points in the survey. Teachers clearly have test fatigue: they feel too much time is being spent preparing students for tests and administering the tests. Predictably, teachers feel most comfortable with the tests they develop, so I think it's the combination of the newness of the assessments, the uncertainty, and the limited amount of time those teachers have had to sort of test drive them.

There was always going to be a transition period and we are clearly still in it.

GP: I agree – there is a lot to pick apart in the data, especially for the more complex or controversial topics. For example, in the commentary you mention that contrary to critics of the Common Core, your poll indicates that most math and English Language Arts teachers have maintained or increased their control over instruction, curriculum and teacher collaboration. How do you think this reality will impact the debate around standards and assessments as time goes on?

MF: This goes back to what you said about striking the balance between teacher autonomy and direction: the results totally counter the concerns that the Common Core is somehow going to strip local schools and teachers of their autonomy, although I am not sure the more ardent critics of the Common Core are going to be convinced.

I also think the results highlight the importance of alignment and access. Even though teachers say their districts provide them with the curriculum for the standards, they are clearly expressing their own autonomy because they report revising and developing their own curricula, as well.

The data led to a good conversation at CEP about that balance. Is there a sweet spot that honors both the autonomy of teachers and integrity of the standards?

GP: That makes a lot of sense, and I think that is why there are so many conversations around state-wide common summative assessments that can help align standards, curriculum, and assessments.

The poll also shows that 90% of teachers believe collaborating with other teachers is helpful and a good use of their time. However, not all collaboration time is created equally. Have you seen – or has CEP looked into – what makes some collaboration time more effective? Is there more to learn about how that collaboration is approached from an implementation standpoint?

MF: We've done a bunch of projects on this idea of time and creating more and better learning time. One thing that's been very clear, both in this survey and in our other work as well, is that time is a very precious commodity for teachers. They highly value the time set aside for collaboration and planning and they feel it has really important and positive impacts on their teaching and also their students' learning. One of the points that I loved was that 80% of the teachers say they collaborate with peers informally, like when they pass one another in the hallway. If you spend any time in schools, this is just something that you see all the time. Teachers can have the most important and intense conversations of the day in 30 seconds in the hallway. They're really scrappy in their attitude about

collaboration.

One of the other things that I think is interesting is that elementary school teachers report collaborating much more often than their high school counterparts. And again, anyone that has done any work in the area of high schools, or has spent time in high schools, really understands that high school teaching is a very different animal than elementary school teaching, and I think it needs to be addressed as such in terms of teacher supports.

Teachers really value the time to collaborate and plan, and I think school leaders or district leaders can capitalize on this: can we do more to make it work so everybody benefits from collaboration? And it's great modeling for the students, too! Collaboration is one of the ultimate 21st century skills. So, when students see their teachers doing it, I think this is just a great way to model excellent behavior.

GP: The poll also reports that large majorities of teachers believe their voices are not often factored into the decision-making process at the district, state, or national levels. ESSA presents an opportunity and actually, a requirement that everybody's voices get heard a lot more substantively in the process. As we see states develop their plans under ESSA, what are some new strategies we might see states and districts use to ensure that teachers are included in the development process?

MF: For me, this is a real process question. I think this is tough because you want to have everyone involved in the process, but everyone who's tried to lead change knows that can be hard. Part of the problem, at least from my view, is that education systems are not very nimble, and they're not always in a position to process inputs.

I think that what teachers do best is provide reality checks for the district, state, and national leaders. They're at the frontline of the policies and the programs - they're at the point of impact. Teachers are very practical creatures. They look at something, they analyze it, and they break it down based on how they can practically make something work in the classroom. That flies in the face of policy. Like I said earlier, it's easy to make policy in the abstract, but it's the actual doing that matters. So teachers can provide a really good reality check about what's working and what's not working.

At the same time, it's important for leaders to hear teacher feedback *and* provide a response - there has to be a very strategic and thoughtful process for how we're going to incorporate that feedback and actually use it to make change.

GP: Were there any findings in the poll that surprised you? Or were there takeaways from the poll that you'd encourage policymakers to spend some time considering?

MF: There are a few things that I found really interesting. The first is the issue of time - and as I said, we've heard this over and over again. I think it's really important for us to find a way to capitalize on the fact that teachers value time and collaboration time as a commodity in their professions.

The second thing is something we touched on when we talked about constantly changing policy agendas. Nobody does their best work when targets are constantly changing; it's true of any sector. Keeping some things consistent and the long game approach is really important.

Also, the detailed set of takeaways that focus on curriculum and how teachers get and use their curriculum is really important because it highlights the impact of the implementation process on curriculum. We need to know how implementation is affecting student achievement because there is the potential for a great deal of disparity in terms of quality and access and training. We have to draw a line between the standards and the implementation process when it comes to student achievement. If we're going to judge the standards, we need to make sure that we understand all the pieces that go into the standards and figure out where the disparities are happening.

Finally, I think it's got to be said that we have to pay attention to the teacher views on the profession itself. They feel that their voices and their opinions aren't being heard and the survey also indicates that those perceptions have an impact on their level of job satisfaction. We have to think about the future of the profession.

GP: CEP as an organization is uniquely positioned to help make sense of different views, research, and perceptions of public education in the U.S. From your vantage point, what do you see as the most misunderstood policy or set of policies right now? And how can education leaders address that misunderstanding and mitigate the confusion?

MF: The first thing is the federal role in education. I think policymakers and Americans as a whole sometimes struggle with really how much influence the federal government should have over education decisions and our public education system. It is a highly decentralized and highly complex system and it's got a strong local component to it. So, I think at times it makes it hard for people to establish a chain of command in their mind when it comes to decisions about education and when you have really thorny issues like standards and testing and the Common Core. It is an important issue and it's actually a really useful and fascinating conversation to have, because it does force people to move beyond specific education policies.

GP: You've had the opportunity to observe policy development from a number of different perspectives – within the U.S. Department of Education, working with school boards, in the advocacy space, etc. Each group obviously has its own point of view, perspectives, and needs. What are some of the common threads you've seen between policy that's been developed well or working out well? Are there any big picture lessons you've observed?

MF: First, policy needs to be both supported and driven by a unified leadership front that really does represent all the players in system. There's a lot of people and lot of organizations with a vested interest in education and it's just so important to have a strong leadership team in place.

Second, and this is to me probably the most important out of anything, is to be realistic about timelines and expectations. I think one of the biggest lessons that I've learned is that education leaders, even though they have all the best intentions to act with urgency, often do set timelines and expectations that are misaligned to the task at hand and the capacity of the people on the ground to actually do the work. I think we have to be very realistic about what we're going to do, when we're going to do it and how long it might take.

The third thing, and this is probably my school board experience speaking, local voices matter immensely. No matter how smart you are and no matter how well intentioned your policies are, no matter how much money you have, if you operate outside the system and don't take the time to get the buy in from the community - and by community that could be teachers, district leaders, parents, business leaders, congress, and more - you're doomed in the long

term. The local control aspect of our education system does not just fade into the background. It is always there and it always demands to be heard.

GP: This is the last question I always ask: if you had five words to describe the key (or keys) to improving education for all students, what would they be?

MF: My five words are: end education by zip code. Because of our how our public school system is funded, so much is based on where you live, where you go to school, and how much money is available because of the tax base - it's inequitable and just wrong.

This is Part V of the Leaders & Lessons blog series. You can also find [Part I](#) (Tulsa Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Deborah Gist), [Part II](#) (Former Maryland State Superintendent Dr. Lillian Lowery), [Part III](#) (DCPS Chancellor Kaya Henderson), [Part IV](#) (Dr. Archie Cubarrubia) on Impatient Optimists.

TAGS **Effective Teaching, Research, Teacher Appreciation Week**

SHARE 



Quick Posts

-  **Vaccine Delivery Team Profiles: Country Programs and Partnerships**
March 02, 2016 - Orin Levine
-  **The world's most promising generation is coming of age. Here's what they need from us**
February 08, 2016 - Christopher Elias, Michael Anderson
-  **The International Decision Support Initiative Is Scaling Up—That Means Better Decisions and Better Health**
February 08, 2016 - Amanda Glassman
-  **Apply Now to Attend our Giving #GatesSocial**
November 10, 2015 - Robin Clewley
-  **Letting Farmers Decide**
August 21, 2015 - Christopher Elias
-  **How Bt Maize Can Help Us End Food Insecurity in Africa**

Connect



Partner

Reader Comments

Last Thought



"Our desire to bring every good thing to our children is the force for good throughout the world. It's what moves our societies forward." —Melinda Gates

BILL & MELINDA
GATES *foundation*

[Foundation Home](#) [Blog Home](#) [About](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Terms of Use](#)