

# Seeing Opportunity with the Minnesota Student Survey

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



To get the equitable, student-centered education system we want and need, **we need more holistic, nuanced measures of student experiences and learning.** Student surveys are a key tool for this.

Surveys yield important information about **outcomes that matter** (i.e. social-emotional development); **educational experiences and environments** (i.e. engagement and safety); and **behavioral and health trends** (i.e. substance use and mental health). This information is used for a variety of purposes (Figure 1). Intended **purpose must inform a survey’s design.**

Research	State policies and decisions	Applications, evaluations, and reporting	Accountability and transparency	School, district, and program decisions	Educator, class and student decisions
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Figure 1. Purposes of statewide youth surveys, arranged from more generalized/higher-level (left) to lower-level (right).

### Findings from Other States

Every state in the country gives some sort of statewide youth survey, aimed at one or more of these purposes. The Minnesota Student Survey (MSS)—our state’s version—has been given every three years since 1989, by a collaborative of four state agencies. It differs notably from other states’ surveys:

<u>Other States</u>	<u>Minnesota</u>
The modal state gives two surveys: one a <b>shorter census survey focused on education</b> , one a <b>sampled survey focused on health</b> (often YRBS).	Minnesota has a <b>single survey</b> , offered to <b>all students</b> (i.e. census) in grades 5, 8, 9, and 11.
Education survey’s purposes focused more on <b>district/school decisions</b> ; health survey’s purpose more on <b>research and policy</b> .	Practically speaking, current purpose is research, program reporting, and state-level decisions; <b>low use at school and district levels.</b>
Survey lengths are generally <b>short, i.e. 50 to 125 items</b> . Most commonly <b>given yearly</b> , sometimes every-other-year.	<b>The longest</b> (255 items) and <b>least frequently given</b> (every three years) census youth survey in the entire country.

### Conclusions for Minnesota

We had formally structured/coded interviews and conversations with over 50 “users” of the MSS, including teachers, school leaders, district leaders, youth workers, county health and human services staff, state administrators, policymakers, and researchers. From those conversations we concluded:

- Ultimately districts, schools, and families decide whether to take the survey. They **must see it as relevant and useful, or participation rates will continue to decline**, and the MSS will not be valid for any purpose. Even researchers and county HHS officials voiced this observation and concern.
- Most school leaders and teachers we spoke to **could not remember details about the survey**, or data from their school/district. *Many had not even heard of it.*
- The MSS is “in competition” with other surveys. Schools and districts **opt for other surveys that give quick, annual, comparable data** that is easier to understand and act on.
- Literally every interviewee indicated the survey was **too long**. At the same time, most users of the survey only look closely at data from a few questions.

*If the core intention for the MSS is to benefit youth, there is a missed opportunity for it to provide useful, actionable information to those who interact directly with them each day.* “

Our overarching recommendation is to **re-center the purpose of the MSS on improving learning and schools**. This is the purpose both most likely to benefit youth, and also most likely to maintain participation rates needed for research, policy, program reporting, and other higher-level purposes.

## Short-term Recommendations

1. **Refocus Purpose.** Explicitly refocus the purpose of the survey as improving learning at the school and district level. Make this explicit in vendor RFPs and/or all internal agency documents.
2. **Clarify Governance.** Clarify the role of the MSS interagency team and each partner agency. Form an advisory committee(s) of students, educators, and community to inform MSS design.
3. **Item Inventory and Criteria.** Inventory *each item* on the survey for: (a) purpose, (b) history, (c) current uses. Create a set of criteria for adding new questions focused on the purpose per #1.
4. **Shorten the Survey.** Use the criteria per #3 to set a max cap of 150 questions (ideally even less) given in any administration of the survey. Use modules/multiple versions to help do that.
5. **Tighten Administration Timeline.** Make the open window to take the survey January through March; provide results, including comparison data, to all districts by mid-May.

## Longer-term Recommendations

6. **Robust Online Tool.** Build an online tool to view, disaggregate, and compare results data.
7. **Align Agency Support.** Align support from state agencies more with results from the tool, across divisions and departments. Use as a common “needs assessment” tool across divisions.
8. **Split Off a Health Survey.** Spin off a separate, *sampled* survey more focused on health and human services. Further reduce the education survey, aiming for a max of ~40 questions. Keep a few key, representative health questions on the more frequent-given education survey.
9. **Increase Frequency of Administration.** Increase the frequency of the surveys. Ideally the sampled health survey would be given every-other year, and the education survey given yearly.



For full report and recommendations see: [www.educationevolving.org/mss](http://www.educationevolving.org/mss)