

USING STUDENT INPUT TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION

by Ryan Evans, Providence Classical Christian School

Many years ago, I took an immensely valuable post-grad class called “Private School Leadership.” The course was designed for current or aspiring school administrators (I was the latter at the time), and taught by a former high school principal from a large Christian school in the Seattle area. Many ideas proved to be worth their weight in gold as I plunged headlong into my first year as a junior high principal at a Christian school.

One of the most beneficial takeaways was an unorthodox method of observing teachers. The premise is based on gathering collective and individual student input on classroom learning. Of course, this method can make even the veteran teacher skittish, conjuring up all sorts of questions.

- To what degree do we trust student input?
- Does welcoming student input lead to an entitlement mentality?
- Can I trust the person who is soliciting the feedback?
- How do you avoid this resulting in a gripe session?
- What can I learn that I don’t already know?

Soliciting student feedback can be risky. However, by following a prescribed format, clearly stating the expectations of the method, and facilitating a tightly-executed dialogue, teachers are afforded a unique

opportunity to allow the most informed classroom audience an appropriate voice for authentic feedback. Establishing, communicating, and following a detailed plan is essential. Below is a step-by-step outline of how to communicate the plan to students. Included are times for each portion of the activity, as staying within stated time guidelines is also important.

EXPLAIN THE FORMAT (6–10 MINUTES)

1. State the objective: Like any good lesson plan, the objective should be clearly stated to students on the front end. “Mrs. Smith has asked me to come in and get your feedback on eighth-grade history this year. This is an opportunity to provide input on what has been most helpful in learning history.” It’s important that students don’t view this as a time to evaluate or criticize a teacher; rather, they are evaluating what helps them learn. Naturally, the teacher is a part of that but not the sole focus.
2. Three key questions: Students answer three key questions, all centered on their learning in the class:
 - a. What are five or more things you really like about the class?
 - b. What are three things to evaluate for change in the class?
 - c. What is a specific idea you have for making the change in each area?

Ryan Evans is the headmaster at Providence Classical Christian School, an ACCS-accredited school in Bothell, Washington. Learn more at <https://www.pccs.org/>.

It's important to convey that the more specific the responses, the better. You may provide an example of a good response and a poor response ahead of time so students have a clear understanding of what you are asking of them.

3. Communicate expectations

- a. This is a small-group exercise. Put the students ideally in groups of three (four will work if necessary). To save time, assign groups prior to class, and do not allow students to choose their own groups.
- b. Small group assignments: Each group must appoint a recorder to write down all their responses. They also will assign a reporter, who will share their small group responses with the class after groups have finished meeting. Provide a graphic organizer with spaces for each question and blank spaces for their responses.
- c. Requirement of group consensus: This is key—only responses having unanimity of opinion by all group members are considered valid and may be recorded. If group consensus on a response is not reached, then students should move on to another idea.
- d. Timing for each question: Inform the students that this process is strictly timed, so they need to keep the discussion moving and stay focused.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION TIME (15 MINUTES)

The bulk of time will be spent in small groups discussing among themselves responses to the three questions. During this time, the facilitator is actively proctoring each group, walking around and ensuring groups are on task. Specific areas to monitor: are they answering the questions asked? Is everyone actively participating? Is consensus reached before recording an answer? Are responses specific enough to be helpful for the teacher?

Have students provide responses for the first question before moving on to the second and third questions. Students find it helpful to link the second and third questions, as the area to evaluate for change (e.g., preparation for tests) is connected to the idea for change (e.g., providing a written study guide a week in advance of the test). Give about six minutes to generate responses to the first question, and then about eight minutes for the second and third questions.

It's helpful to assign each group a designated meeting spot in the room and remind students to speak quietly to ensure responses are uniquely theirs (to avoid being overheard by another group). For large classes, consider sending a few groups to the hallway to reduce noise in the classroom.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION TIME (15–20 MINUTES)

At the conclusion of small group discussions, bring everyone back to the classroom and have each small group sit together. Starting with group one, the reporter in each group will share their group responses. The facilitator will write a composite list of all the responses for the class to view (typically on the white board). If another group shares a response already written on the board, the facilitator will add a check mark to that response, indicating equivalent responses. As mentioned, combine questions two and three, as the responses are connected (area to evaluate for change and idea for making the change). Give every group an opportunity to present their responses. Depending on the size of the class, column one normally comprises around fifteen different responses, and columns two and three around ten. Have a responsible student copy word-for-word what is written on the board as a master copy.

If time allows, have students vote individually for which responses in each column they feel are most

essential to their learning in the class.

This is typically the most challenging portion of the observation, as students in other groups often have difficulty staying focused. At times you'll encounter disagreement between groups (e.g., one group may list something they really like that another group lists as something to evaluate for change). This indeed can prove to be a valuable teaching moment.

TEACHER FEEDBACK CONFERENCE AND TIMING

The final piece requires the facilitator meet with the teacher and share student responses. Photocopy the master copy of the feedback for the teacher and walk through each data point. It's best to meet with the teacher within a day of the feedback session to maximize recall of specific student comments and to convey the importance of the feedback to the students. Teachers are encouraged to share with their students how they plan to use the feedback.

This format is best when conducted about six to eight weeks into the start of the school year for a few reasons:

1. Doing so allows sufficient time for students to gauge their own progress and reflect on the classroom learning.
2. It gives the teacher an opportunity to hear feedback and make any necessary corrections early enough in the year to improve the learning experience.
3. The administrator can use the information as a point of encouragement and is informed on any necessary areas of improvement.

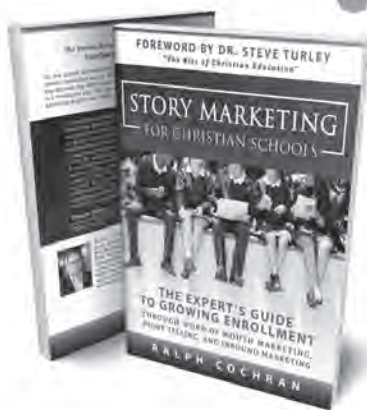
CLARIFICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A "growth mindset" school culture, where feedback is encouraged and welcomed rather than simply tolerated and endured, is vital to this exercise.
2. Student feedback sessions are conducted on an annual basis, and for one class per teacher.
3. The observation itself requires a full-class period, usually 45 minutes. If a group is doing this for the second or third time, explaining the guidelines will require less time and opens up more time for discussion.
4. No teacher should be present during this student session.
5. The ideal facilitator is an objective person such as the headmaster or principal and requires objectivity, teacher and student advocacy, and professional diplomacy.
6. This method isn't recommended for any grade lower than seventh. Particularly for middle school students, it's helpful to convey a belief in their ability to provide appropriate feedback.
7. Avoid using this method with teachers who are experiencing obvious challenges in the classroom. In such situations, the facilitator's role of maintaining a positive ethos is nearly impossible.
8. Ideally the teacher can use the feedback to set at least one specific goal based on a common theme discovered and discussed in the feedback conference.
9. This method is best utilized alongside other important supervision strategies such as formal and informal classroom observations, and yearly goal setting.
10. An ideal class size is about fifteen students. Small classes reduce the ability to spot trends, and large classes can prove unwieldy and require brisker pacing.
11. I typically allow the teacher to select the class

from whom feedback will be solicited. I also seek to avoid soliciting a grade level for more than two or three of these observations a year, as too many reduces the novelty of the exercise.

Having used this format for almost twenty years, I and the teachers I've worked with have found it uniquely helpful and a win-win proposition: the teacher gleans helpful information, and the students are able to provide valuable input in an environment with appropriate boundaries. When managed carefully and precisely, the feedback offers teachers real-time input from the audience in the best position to provide it.

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Douglas Wilson

Co-Founder of The Association of Classical Christian Schools, Logos School, and New Saint Andrews College and Minister at Christ Church



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