



Asking for Feedback

Listening to Student Voices in Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD

“If we’re not listening to students we’re missing out on a key stakeholder group in our system. When you ask students for their feedback, you learn things you might not have otherwise known.”

AT A GLANCE

District
Carrollton-Farmers Branch
Independent School District

Location
Dallas County, Texas

Schools
24 elementary schools
6 middle schools
5 high schools

Demographics
Student enrollment: 25,235
83% students of color
65% FRPL
27% English Language Learners

Superintendent
Dr. Bobby Burns

ABOUT

Located in the Dallas suburbs, Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District (CFBISD) serves nearly 26,000 students across 36 schools. The district centers around a singular mission: continuous improvement.

This mission is made visible through the dedication of the CFBISD staff to continuously improve academic outcomes for students, but it doesn’t stop with test scores. Non-academic aspects of the student experience, such as school climate, culture, and social-emotional learning, are specifically emphasized. Yet in 2012, the district felt it was missing system-wide data to understand how students were truly experiencing their schools and classrooms.

In 2013, CFBISD partnered with YouthTruth to gather annual feedback from its students in order to learn where targeted improvements could be made to keep the district on track in fulfilling its mission. School and district leaders make it a priority to understand and meet the needs of their diverse community and they have found that a prerequisite to doing that well is to ask students directly what those needs are.

“It’s hard to tell the story of the district without telling the 26,000 stories of every child who walks through our door,” says Georgeanne Warnock, Associate Superintendent of Educational Services. “Each student has their own strengths and challenges, and each of their families has their own triumphs and heartaches. We really try to hear what each child needs.”



CFBISD MISSION

High achievement for each student

- F Continuously improve student learning
- F Continuously improve the learning environment
- F Continuously improve operational effectiveness
- F Continuously improve community support

THE CHALLENGE: TARGETING RESOURCES STRATEGICALLY

The challenges that CFBISD faces are similar to those faced by school systems across the country. How can a district prioritize resources in the areas where they will have the greatest impact on providing all students with a high-quality education?

District and school leaders knew that their students had insights that could help administrators understand where to target improvements — but they were not sure how to best harness that feedback.

- F How can a large, diverse district ask students directly about how to make their school experience better, in a way that allows for candid feedback?
- F How can school and district leaders understand elements of the school experience, such as engagement, culture, or relationships that aren't typically measured through traditional means?
- F How can district leaders partner with students to build a culture in which schools are truly places for students to learn and expand their world?



THE STRATEGY: STUDENT PERCEPTION SURVEYS

CFBISD's commitment to listening is rooted in its belief that 1) students have a unique and important perspective on what works and does not work in K-12 education and 2) students should have a voice in the decisions that directly affect their learning environment.

“Kids will be very honest with you when they know that you care about what they think,” says Warnock. “Everyone wants to have a say in making their surroundings meaningful, and students should have that. If we're not listening to students, we're missing out on a key stakeholder group in our educational system.”

District leaders view student perception surveys as tools through which they can actively engage students. When students see their feedback incorporated into changes, it can be empowering. Students' orientation towards school can shift: school becomes a partnership, not just something that happens to them.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- The [Measures of Effective Teaching](#) study found that students survey results are predictive of student achievement and that “student surveys produce more consistent results than classroom observations or achievement gain measures.”
- A research synthesis from the [American Educational Research Association](#) found that by promoting a positive school climate, schools can allow greater equality in educational opportunities, decrease socioeconomic inequalities, and enable more social mobility for students.
- The [John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University](#) found that students' motivational beliefs are closely related to their achievement, and classroom practices that create a caring learning environment improve student motivation.

Why YouthTruth?

CFBISD partnered with YouthTruth to gather valid, reliable, year-over-year feedback from its students on the topics that matter most to student achievement. Two important factors that led CFBISD to choose YouthTruth were the ability to track metrics over time and the understanding of how its data compared to other schools nationally.

In addition to longitudinal, comparative data, CFBISD also wanted a hands-on, partnership-based approach. “The in-depth thought partnership that YouthTruth provides enables our teams to have a more nuanced understanding of the data,” Warnock shared. “In a day and age where school leaders are inundated with data from a variety of sources, working with a partner who helps think through how to turn student feedback into action was key for us.”



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THE IMPACT

Strategic Planning

CFBISD incorporated YouthTruth survey items into the district's Vision 2020 strategic plan to measure their performance over time in non-academic areas. They selected six items from three themes in the survey:

SCHOOL CULTURE	ACADEMIC RIGOR	STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
<i>Most students in this school treat adults with respect.</i>	<i>The work I do in class makes me really think.</i>	<i>I enjoy coming to school most of the time.</i>
<i>Most adults in this school treat students with respect.</i>	<i>In most of my classes, we learn a lot every day.</i>	
	<i>Most of my teachers want me to explain my answers - why I think what I think.</i>	

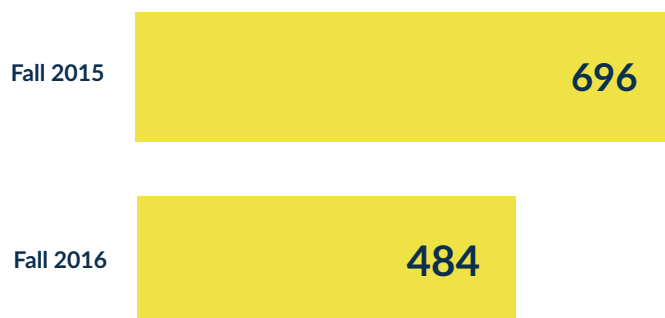
In addition to tracking school-wide perceptual changes over time in response to these six questions, the district also closely monitors how students with different demographic characteristics respond. "We use the toggling in YouthTruth reports to disaggregate the data by gender, grade-level, race/ethnicity, FRPL, and ELL subgroups to help us keep track of progress toward making all learning experiences equitable." says Warnock.

Improving School Culture and Strengthening Relationships

When Stephanie Jimenez, principal at Field Middle School, received her first year of student feedback data, it was sobering. "Our biggest takeaways were that our kids don't feel close to other kids, and they don't feel close to adults," says Jimenez. "We had to look at that for what it is."

This data confirmed what Jimenez and other school leaders knew anecdotally and provided more concrete insights to help prioritize social-emotional learning and relationship building. The student feedback on school culture and relationships with teachers and peers helped lead to the implementation of a new social-emotional learning program called Homeroom/Home-base.

First Semester Discipline/Tardy Referrals



HOMEROOM	
F	Group of 15-20 students and a teacher, grouped by gender to foster trust and understanding
F	Meetings at the beginning of every school day
F	Use of common lesson plan on a weekly topic to facilitate conversations
F	Topics focus on social-emotional learning and character education
HOME-BASE	
F	Meetings at the end of the school day
F	Circle format for conversations
F	Engage in peer support practices during student conversations about personal lives
F	Focus on building positive school culture
F	Relationship building between students and teachers
F	Accountability practices among peers
F	Team building exercises to promote trust and to strengthen relationships

Taking forty five minutes out of the school day to build students' social-emotional skills and relationships is an investment, and it's one that has paid off for Field Middle School. As a result of the program, they saw more positive feedback in their YouthTruth data on relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, and overall school culture measures. They've also seen the positive impact on their disciplinary referral rates, which dropped nearly 30%.

"Kids and their parents are seeing the huge benefits of this time together, and it's all evidence of the feedback they gave us in the YouthTruth survey," says Jimenez. "I'm so glad we get to do this every year."

Engaging Students in the Conversation

When students at Creekview High School (CHS) took the YouthTruth survey for the first time, Principal Joe La Puma wanted them to know that school leaders were genuinely listening to what they had to say. Rather than gathering students' feedback and letting that data sit on a shelf, La Puma used the YouthTruth data as the starting point to learn more. After receiving the data, he organized student panels to respond to and answer questions about the feedback.

Conducted during students' advisory period, the panels allowed students, teachers, and administrators to go beyond the ratings and talk about their specific experiences. The themes identified for discussion were academic rigor and school culture. Students shared candidly about things that they felt weren't going so well, such as lack of connection between the content they learned in class and their lives outside of school. A celebration-worthy topic was the positive school culture.

After students and teachers engaged in these advisory period conversations, teachers came back together to discuss and identify common themes. School leaders now use the feedback as they plan for the upcoming school year. "This is a long process; we're going slowly but being deliberate," says La Puma. "We're picking a couple of things that we think are the biggest areas for growth and going from there. This year has really been about connecting with students and making sure they understand that we're listening and that we care about what they have to say."



STUDENT PANELS - HOW TO



Clarify your learning goals

CHS Example:

Goal 1: Students will have the opportunity to share their thoughts, viewpoints, and feedback regarding our school.

Goal 2: Teachers will have the opportunity to explore students' thinking behind the YouthTruth data.



Before the panel

- Read Marc Prensky's article "[The 21st Century Digital Learner.](#)"
- If needed, re-familiarize yourself with your YouthTruth report.
- Based on your YouthTruth data, prepare 3-5 key questions that you'd like to ask students.



To start the discussion

Set the groundwork. You can use the following prompt as an example:

"As you may recall, you recently took the YouthTruth survey. Since then, our campus staff and administrators have been looking at the data and your responses. While we have a lot to celebrate at our school, we always strive to be better. Some of our data caused us to want to dig deeper to learn more about your thoughts and opinions. Today, we'd like to spend some time talking about a few of those areas."



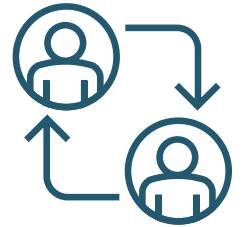
Notes for facilitators

- Consider setting norms or ground rules before you begin.
- Examples: actively listen to one another, speak openly and honestly, monitor your airtime, respect the opinions and experiences of others, etc.
- It's important to monitor our own reactions to feedback. It can be easy to feel defensive, to dismiss other's feelings, or to want to justify, explain, or argue.
- Students may say things you do not agree with. Remember, a student's perception is his/her reality, and the goal today is not to judge, but to get a window into what they experience here at school.

CONTINUING THE FEEDBACK LOOP

CFBISD closes the feedback loop with students from the district level as well. The district incorporates its YouthTruth feedback into interactive student panels and conversations with administrators, including at their annual summer staff training. This practice has deepened the conversation as district leaders see how students across the district and from different demographics may have varying experiences. By integrating student feedback into strategic planning and bringing students into conversations about the data, CFBISD has made specific changes within schools to create a more positive experience for students and empower them as co-creators in their own educational experience.

The data also helps school and district leaders look beyond test scores as indicators of success. For Associate Superintendent Warnock, this data has helped provide a more holistic understanding of student experiences. “The only way you get better is from asking the right questions and listening to the responses,” she says. “These surveys give us the opportunity to get a bigger, more well-rounded picture of what students are experiencing.”



ABOUT GEORGEANNE WARNOCK

Associate Superintendent of Educational Services, CFBISD



Passionate about high quality education for all students, Georgeanne Warnock serves as associate superintendent of Educational Services for Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD. She previously served as principal at R.L. Turner High School, leading the school in transformation from a traditional comprehensive high school to career-based small learning communities. She began her career teaching social studies and English at Creekview High School in 1999.

Ms. Warnock graduated from Trinity University with a BA in English and history and has two Master of Arts degrees in education from the University of North Texas; her doctoral work is in progress at the University of North Texas.

ABOUT STEPHANIE JIMENEZ

Principal, Vivian Field Middle School



Stephanie Jimenez is the principal at Vivian Field Middle School. “When we integrate well-being, character development, and rigorous academics with our understanding of how the brain learns, we partner with children to co-create a kinder, more compassionate world.”

She received her M.Ed. from North Texas State University and her B.S. from Texas A&M University; her doctoral work is in progress at Southern Methodist University.

ABOUT JOE LA PUMA

Principal, Creekview High School



Mr. La Puma has worked in the Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD as a principal for the past 12 years. Five of those years were at DeWitt Perry Middle School, and the last seven years were at Creekview High School. Prior to coming to CFBISD, Joe served eleven years in Irving ISD where he held positions as a high school ESL teacher, ESL department chair, high school football and baseball coach, and middle school assistant principal.

He received his Master of Educational Administration from the University of North Texas and a B.A. in education from the University of Texas at El Paso.

ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder perceptions to help educators accelerate improvements in their K-12 schools and classrooms. Through validated survey instruments and tailored advisory services, YouthTruth partners with schools, districts, states, and educational organizations to enhance learning for all students. For a tour of our interactive, online reports, sign up to join a webinar here: www.youthtruthsurvey.org/get-started/#webinar.



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