High Tech High & YouthTruth

How One Innovative School Network Uses Student Perception Data for Continuous Improvement

YouthTruth STUDENT SURVEY

A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

ABOUT HIGH TECH HIGH

High Tech High (HTH) is a charter network of twelve schools in San Diego County. All of these schools serve a diverse, lottery-selected student population. HTH is differentiated in its design principles of personalization, adult world connection, common intellectual mission, and teacher as designer. For more information about High Tech High, please visit www.hightechhigh.org.

HIGH TECH HIGH AND YOUTHTRUTH

Since 2011, HTH has used YouthTruth to gather student feedback to inform instructional, leadership and school model changes. For the first two years of the partnership, High Tech High surveyed high school students about their overall school experience—from students' engagement in school and relationships, to their perceptions of school culture and college and career readiness. As YouthTruth developed validated, age-appropriate surveys for lower grades, High Tech High expanded survey participation to middle school students in 2013 and elementary grades 3-5 in 2014.

High Tech High also deepened its understanding of students' classroom experience by incorporating YouthTruth's Feedback for Teachers survey in 2013. This provides insights to inform teacher practice and continued professional development. HTH administers the survey annually, and has made YouthTruth an integral part of their commitment to improvement.

> "YouthTruth has been this very powerful tool for us, in terms of looking at ourselves honestly and critically and pushing ourselves to get better."

Q & A with High Tech High's CAO/COO and Dean of Students

In spring 2014, YouthTruth sat down with High Tech High's Ben Daley, Chief Academic Officer/Chief Operating Officer, and Nikki Hinostro, Dean of Students for High Tech High International School, to reflect on the network's experience using the YouthTruth Student Survey over the past four years.

💬 What were your initial reactions to the survey?

💬 What is the hardest part about receiving student feedback?

💬 How are you using perception data in decision making?

💬 Students take a lot of surveys. How is YouthTruth different?

💬 What advice do you have for other school leaders using student feedback?

BEN DALEY
Chief Academic Officer/
Chief Operating Officer

NIKKI HINOSTRO
Dean of Students
for High Tech High
International School

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💬 What were your initial reactions to the survey?

HINOSTRO: When I first heard about YouthTruth, I thought, "This is perfect. This survey focuses on what students have to say." We've seen a lot of surveys that are for parents and adults, but student voice has to be at the center. And because we are a school that focuses on social class integration, we want to make sure that we hear all students' voices in the process of making decisions around programs and structure.

> "We've used the YouthTruth data to support teachers."

> "This survey is aligned with our principles more so than other traditional surveys."

💬 What is the hardest part about receiving student feedback?

DALEY: One of the challenges for us has been knowing what to do with the data and how to be thoughtful about that process with our staff. But hearing what our students think is one of the most important things we can do as educators. I think when you realize that, you just have to work through the adult issues getting in the way of hearing from the kids.

HINOSTRO: As an organization, we want to be able to take critical feedback and make changes for our kids. We get a lot of positive feedback here and that's great. When an organization doesn't get [critical feedback] very much, it's a shock – it's surprising. We aim to have a culture, organizationally, of identifying places where we really should improve. Hearing it from the kids makes it more urgent for us.

Listening to students is sometimes challenging. Some teachers were ranked lower in general and that was hard to face. As school leaders, we responded by saying you need to compare yourself to yourself; there are a lot of factors that play into this. At the same time, for teachers, who are able to say, "Okay, this is what my kids are saying" – they responded with, "I have to step up. I have to make changes and listen to my kids."

💬 How are you using student perception data in decision making?

HINOSTRO: We use the YouthTruth data to support teachers. All staff members come together and we look at the data. We focus on specific areas: four areas to celebrate and two areas where we can make progress. Teachers looked at the data in detail to understand how students were experiencing school and what students needed within their classroom experience and relationships with teachers.

Most recently, while looking at our college and career readiness component, we identified that students in 11th and 12th grades were saying, "Yes, we understand about the college process." And our 9th and 10th grade students told us, "No, we don't – we don't feel as ready for the college experience or ready to make the decisions around college." With our College Advisor and Director, we are looking at next steps to help our 9th and 10th graders prepare for the process.

Additionally, we found that in the process of focusing so much on college, we haven't put as much effort into the career choices that our students are going to be making. Based on the data, it is clear to us that it's important to be talking more about careers. This year we are going to be having a career day. Also, we are going to be working more with our students about their own personal choices for careers and what they can glean from career-related conversations with adults.

> "This survey is so important because it pushes us as educators."

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> ❝ "You get to see the data in context."

💬 Students take a lot of surveys. How is YouthTruth different?

DALEY: When you get results back, you get to see the data in context. When students are asked how they feel about the relevance of their math class and they say, "3 out of 5", one question you're left with is, "Do all kids feel this way about math class, or are kids in our school having a different reaction compared to kids in general?" With YouthTruth, I find that the norming of the information adds a lot of value. It's not just a survey.

HINOSTRO: YouthTruth feels like a natural extension of our network. The areas that YouthTruth focuses on help us get feedback in the right areas and help us grow in alignment with our values, design principles, and priorities.

We have designed our own surveys within small groups, but haven't had anything that we felt confident enough in to use at the organizational level. We also haven't put resources into that approach, and this survey was meaningful enough to us to continue to fund.

This is worth our investment. This survey is aligned with our mission, vision, and principles more so than other traditional surveys. It's a survey that looks deeply at things like relationships with adults and students. It looks at engagement.

For us, engagement is something that we think we do well in, but when you break it down into specific questions to help support what engagement really is for kids, it helps us dissect our understanding. This survey is so important because it pushes us as educators.

💬 What advice do you have for other school leaders using student feedback?

DALEY: Before you give the survey, have a clear plan of what you're going to do when you get the results back. Also, take advantage of the support of YouthTruth. The thing about YouthTruth staff is they're so unbelievably responsive. It's just been such a pleasure for our whole organization to work with YouthTruth in a lot of different ways.

HINOSTRO: When it comes to sharing the data with staff, first spend time with the data on your own so that you have really looked at it and asked questions of the YouthTruth staff to help you understand it. Anticipate what your staff is going to feel and experience. Then you're prepared to be a support to them as they go through the feedback.

Creating a culture of celebration around this survey is also an important piece. There are many places where our kids are telling us we are doing exceptionally well. Finding ways to celebrate with our students and with our staff is an important next step after

> ❝ "We want to make sure that we hear all students' voices in the process of making decisions around programs and structure."

Here are some other tips that **HINOSTRO** shared:
- ➜ Celebrate first. Find the areas you want to highlight as areas of strengths for your school or organization.
- ➜ Create a culture and space where making progress and identifying areas for growth is encouraged. We are always going to need to grow in certain areas.
- ➜ Take time with the students and share back the data with them so that you can understand the data.
- ➜ Include the students in revisiting the data and taking action steps.

surveying. If you are going to do multiple years of YouthTruth, which I think is the most effective approach, make sure you connect with students before the survey is re-administered to review what has changed since the last administration. We spent time with the students to identify were our results were favorable and where we scored lower and what we did as a response to last year so that students could feel invested in the process. When managed well by the entire community, the process is supportive of overall school growth.

DALEY: YouthTruth has been this very powerful tool for us, in terms of looking at ourselves honestly and critically and pushing ourselves to get better.

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MORE ABOUT BEN DALEY

**Chief Academic Officer/
Chief Operating Officer**

Ben oversees all academics and operations across the High Tech High network of schools. He acts as an advisor to fifteen high school students and teaches and advises students in the HTH Graduate School of Education, where he is the Director of Clinical Sites. Ben joined HTH to teach physics as a founding faculty member in fall 2000. He is a graduate of Haverford College where he majored in physics and was credentialed in secondary physics and math. After graduation, he traveled to the Philippines and taught science and math in Manila. Upon his return to the U.S., he taught physics and AP physics in Washington, D.C. before moving to California to teach at Pomona and Pitzer Colleges. Ben earned an M.A. in science education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is an Aspen-Pahara Education Fellow and a Fellow of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

MORE ABOUT NIKKI HINOSTRO

**Dean of Students for High Tech
High International School**

Nikki Hinostro graduated from the University of Notre Dame with a double-major in Psychology and Computers. She received her Masters of Education from Loyola Marymount University. Nikki's teaching tenure includes teaching elementary and middle school students on both coasts as she taught in Los Angeles and later, Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 2004 Nikki returned to her hometown of San Diego and began teaching 7th grade at High Tech High. In 2005 Nikki became the Director of High Tech Middle Media Arts and then, in the fall of 2007, co-led the opening of High Tech High North County. Most recently, Nikki transferred to High Tech High International, where, as the Dean of Students, she strives to facilitate student leadership with an impressive staff and student body.

Anonymous Comments from High Tech High Students

"Thanks for making this survey! ☺ I think it was helpful to me too! I hadn't really thought about what was asked until I read and answered the questions."

"Every student should have at least one teacher that motivates them to do better in school, especially if they don't have that support from other authorities at home."

"Great survey – it seems like people can really help the school."

"The thing about YouthTruth staff is they're so unbelievably responsive."

ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student 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 visit www.youthtruthsurvey.org/products-services/#video.

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🖥 www.youthtruthsurvey.org

✉ hello@youthtruthsurvey.org

📞 844-987-8847 (toll free)

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