



*Seeing
Opportunity
with the*

Minnesota Student Survey

Expanding relevance and use among
educators, families, and students
driving equitable, student-centered learning

About this report

This paper builds on a prior Education Evolving report, *Defining and Measuring Student-Centered Outcomes* (www.educationevolving.org/outcomes), which lays out a foundational argument and framework. This paper goes a step further, with concrete recommendations for the Minnesota Student Survey as one key component in a statewide student-centered measurement strategy.

WITH DEEP GRATITUDE

We are immensely thankful to the 50+ teachers, administrators, students, social workers, county and state agency staff, and researchers we spoke to for this paper. We do not list them by name because we spoke with them on conditions of anonymity, but each contributed immensely to the final product. Thank you!

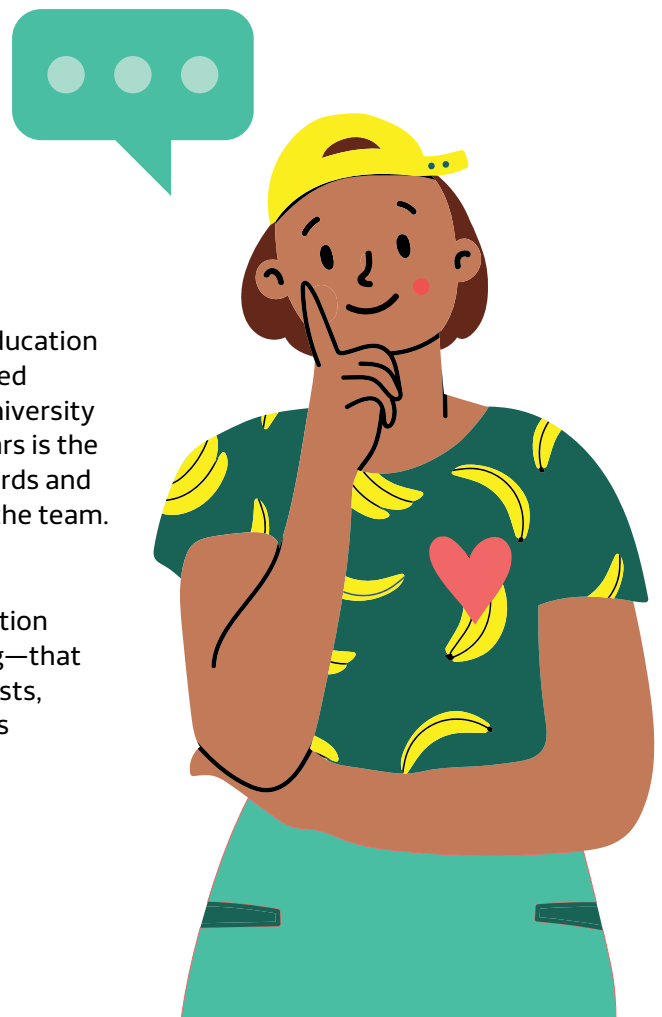
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ABOUT EDUCATION EVOLVING

We are a Minnesota-based nonprofit, nonpartisan organization focused on advancing equitable, student-centered learning—that is learning that honors each student’s unique assets, interests, identities, and aspirations. To that end, we support teachers designing and leading schools, and policies that catalyze community-led innovation.

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Introduction

The Power and Potential in Surveys

*As goes the old adage,
what gets measured gets done.¹*

To get the equitable, student-centered² education system we want and need—one which honors each unique student, and prepares them for the changing 21st century world—we need more holistic, nuanced measures of learning.

1. This is the opening line of our prior paper on this topic, which lays a broader conceptual groundwork: Esdal, Lars. “Defining and Measuring Student-Centered Outcomes.” Saint Paul, MN: Education Evolving, October 2018. View online at: www.educationevolving.org/outcomes

2. We define student-centered learning as learning that honors the unique assets, interests, identities, and aspirations of each young person. Read more about our seven principles of student centered learning and the research that supports them, at: www.educationevolving.org/learning

Surveys are one tool for this. They capture important **outcomes that matter to students, families, and society**,³ but aren't covered by conventional assessments and data—for example, commitment to learning, resilience, and social competencies such as collaboration and respect.

Surveys also gauge **student experiences and learning environments**, which are both inherently important and also “leading indicators” for learning.⁴ For example, are students engaged? Do they have strong relationships with adults? Do they feel safe and respected?

Finally, surveys capture important **broader youth behavioral and health information**, for example on substance use, activities, diet, mental health, community safety, and other life experiences both positive and adverse.



Purpose and Scope of This Report

Students, in Minnesota and nationally, take a number of surveys. Some are given by their district, some by their school. Additionally, the vast majority of states, including Minnesota, have a statewide youth survey.

This paper is focused specifically on the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS), our statewide survey. We explore what purpose the MSS does—or should—serve in our state, and propose a set of recommendations for how it might evolve to better meet that purpose.

In research for this report, we spoke with dozens of “users” of the survey here in Minnesota, including teachers, school leaders, district leaders, youth workers, county health and human services staff, state administrators, policymakers, and researchers.⁵ Additionally, we looked beyond Minnesota for ideas. We built a 50-state database of how all other states structured their surveys, in terms of concepts measured, grades surveyed, number of questions, whether they sample vs. survey all students, etc. Finally, we dug deep on six other states, doing additional research and interviewing survey administrators in each.

3. Mandinach, Ellen B., Ryan C. Miskell, and Edith S. Gummer. “Parental Educational Decision Making: The Information They Seek and What They Want from Data Systems.” *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 122, no. 1 (January 2020): 1–42

4. Rodriguez, Michael C, Carlos Chavez, Tai Do, Alejandra Miranda, José R. Palma, and Mireya Smith. 2020. “The Sociocultural Contexts of Learning: A Brief Literature Review.” Minnesota Youth Development Research Group. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota

5. Specifically, we conducted formal, structured interviews with 24 individuals, and had additional conversations with 30+ others.

Background

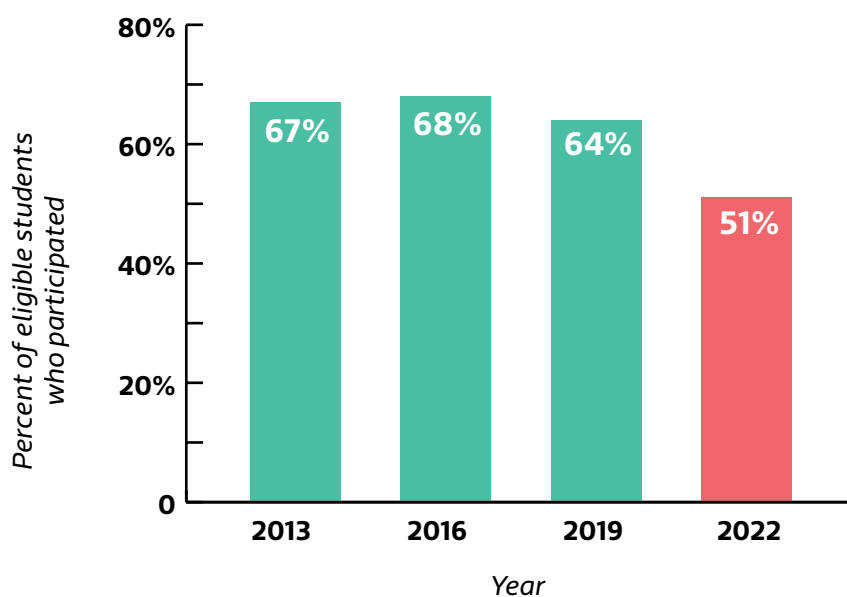
The Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) Today

The MSS was first given in 1989. Four state agencies (the Departments of Education, Health, Human Services, and Public Safety), each of whom were previously giving their own surveys, collaborated to create a joint survey to ease the burden both on survey administrators and on students.

Since then, the survey has evolved. Over time, it has been used to inform and report on more and more local, state, and federal programs. And, it's been amended to cover emerging issues among youth (for example, vaping and mental health). These changes have almost always meant growth in length: in 1989 the survey included 182 items; by 2022 it included 255.⁶

The MSS is given every three years, typically to students in grades 5, 8, 9, and 11 (though schools can add grades 6, 7, 10, and 12—and some do). The survey is optional, both to districts and to families and students. In the most recent administration in 2022, 51 percent of eligible students in those grades completed the survey. Districts conduct the survey between January and June and usually receive results over the summer; results are typically released publicly by late fall.

MSS questions fall within a number of intersecting domains. Many capture student demographic and identity information. Others capture behavioral information, such as substance use, nutrition, and other determinants of health. Some capture students' experiences and engagement in and out of school. Given its breadth, it would be more appropriately titled the "Minnesota Youth Survey."



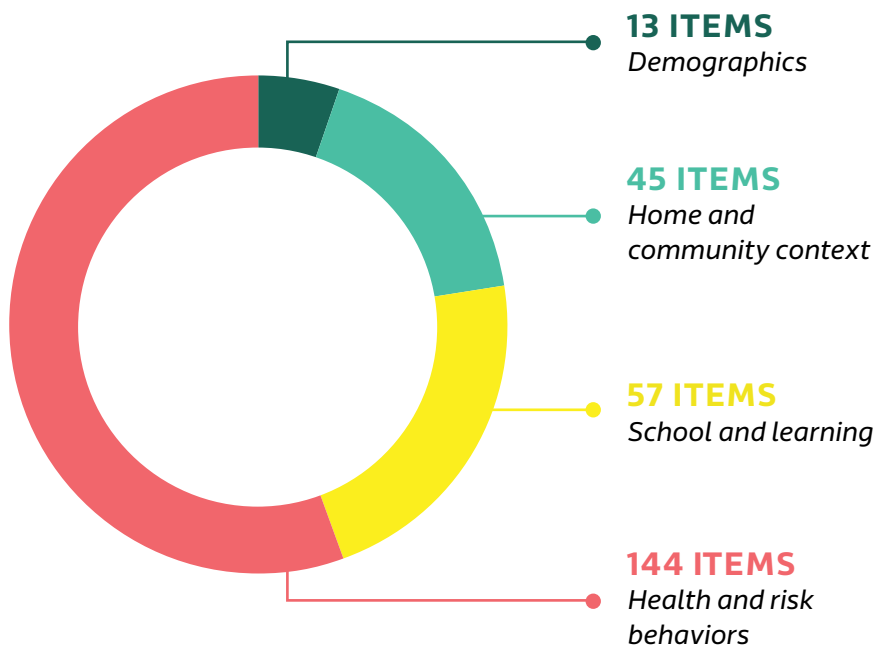
Minnesota Student Survey participation rates over time

FIGURE 1. Participation rates of eligible students in the MSS have fallen modestly over time, though in 2022 (when Covid was causing significant disruption) participation was lower.

6. Survey total item counts reported here—and elsewhere in the paper—include the total number of items, including multiple items within a single question stem. Further, we report the maximum possible number of items a student could encounter on the survey (though for some students, a small number of items are skipped depending on their answers to prior questions).

Minnesota Student Survey item coverage, by domain

FIGURE 2. In selecting domains and assigning items to them for the purpose of this chart, our goal was to give a general sense of what is on the survey. We recognize the limitations of such an analysis, as items are not formally categorized by domain on the published survey instrument.



Purposes of Surveys— In Minnesota and Beyond

Early in this project, we identified how critically important it is to be clear on the intended **purpose for and usage of** a survey. A survey’s purpose shapes myriad decisions about its design: what questions to ask, who to give it to, how often, whether to sample or give it to all students, etc.

Minnesota’s student survey, as well as surveys in other states we looked at, fulfill a variety of purposes. In our conversations and research, we identified six primary purposes of youth surveys, detailed in Table 1 below.

In reviewing each purpose, we also introduce a three-area taxonomy we will use for the remainder of the paper. We identify what each purpose might suggest in terms of survey **use** (by whom and how), **content** (the topics and quantity of questions that should be on the survey) and **administration** (when the survey should be given, to whom, how often, and how).



TABLE 1. Survey purposes—and our conclusions about what each purpose should imply for survey design in terms of use, content, and administration.

PURPOSE	USE: <i>Who uses and how</i>	CONTENT: <i>What the questions cover</i>	ADMINISTRATION: <i>When it's given and to whom</i>
Research	Researchers , to understand and explain generalizable trends, inequities, and relationships between variables.	Students' perceptions, experiences, and behaviors are important to understand for these uses. Given sampling and less frequent administration (see cell to the right), the aggregate burden on students is less, and so it is more reasonable (and politically viable) for the survey to be a bit longer , and include more general youth behavioral and health questions.	Every two to three years is appropriate, given these uses are not attempting to gauge immediate results of interventions and program changes. Weighted sampling and giving the survey only to some grades may be reasonable given the level of analysis of these uses is often state or county level, and does not generally require detailed conclusions down to the school level.*
State policies and decisions	State administrators and policymakers , to design and adapt programs, and target investments.		
Program applications, evaluations, and reporting	State agencies, counties, and funders , to make decisions and run programs; grant applicants and recipients , to justify and report on use of funds.		
Accountability and transparency	Families , to choose schools and push for improvement; state, district, and charter authorizers leaders , to inform school support and interventions.	Students' experiences, perceptions, behaviors, and cognitive/emotional development are relevant for these uses. Additionally, in order to justify regular use of student and educator time (ideally yearly; see cell to the right), the survey needs to be shorter for these uses.	Yearly ideally in order to give timely information on whether changes and interventions are working. Best to survey all students (above a certain minimum appropriate age), for a thorough understanding of all students' experiences.
District, school, and program decisions	School and district leaders , to select, design, and adapt programs, curricula, and interventions.		
Educator and student decisions	Educators and students , to adapt their individual learning, instructional, pedagogical, and other practices.	Questions educators can use to shape their practice (i.e. instructionally-sensitive questions). To be used frequently and formatively as this use would suggest, survey needs to be minimally disruptive and very short .	Yearly at a minimum , potentially more frequently or even on-demand, by all students in a given class, program, or school-wide.

* We acknowledge the caveat that, when using a sampling strategy for surveys, there may be challenges with making valid conclusions for small student groups (for example, based on student ethnicity, gender identity, etc.) and/or with looking at intersections among small student groups. A carefully designed weighted sampling strategy can be used to address this, but is of course still challenging.

Findings from Other States

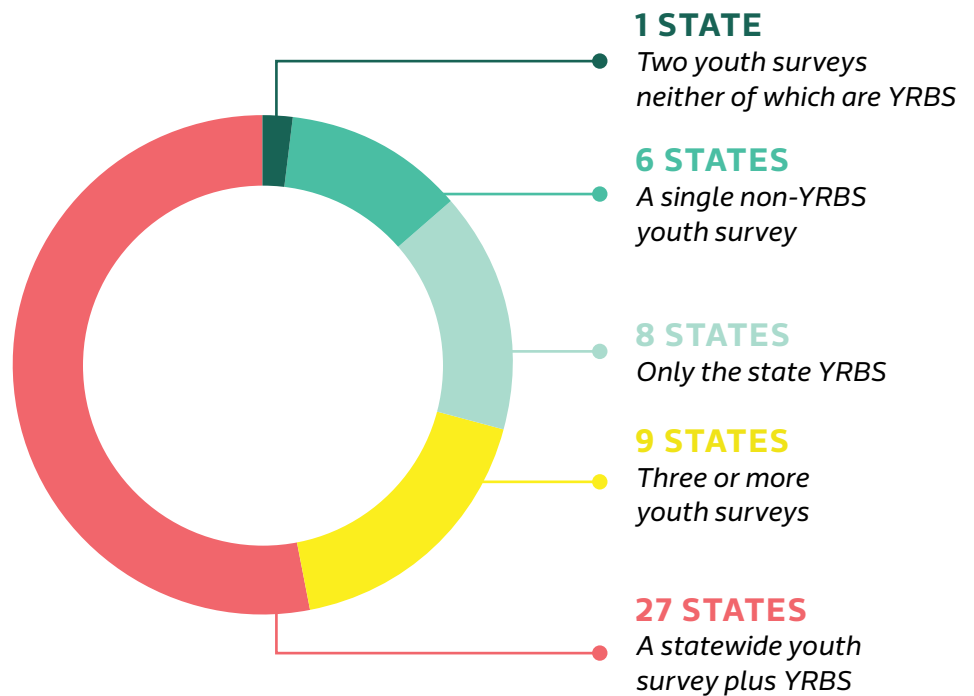
Youth Surveys Across All 50 States

As we explored ideas for improving the MSS, we took stock of how other states use their youth surveys. All 50 states plus the District of Columbia give some sort of statewide youth survey.⁷

The following charts summarize what we learned about those surveys, by browsing state websites and information we requested directly from state survey administrators.

Statewide youth survey administration

FIGURE 3: How many and which types of youth surveys each state gives. Minnesota gives a single non-YRBS youth survey. For more on the YRBS (i.e. Youth Risk Behavior Survey, administered by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention), see sidebar on page 11.



⁷ Our criteria for inclusion in this report was youth surveys that are given on a regular basis over the course of many years and cover a variety of youth health, safety, and/or education topics. We excluded surveys that were given one time (for example, surveys focused on Covid) as well as those focused narrowly on a specific topic (for example, Youth Tobacco Surveys or YTSes).

Number of items on a statewide youth survey

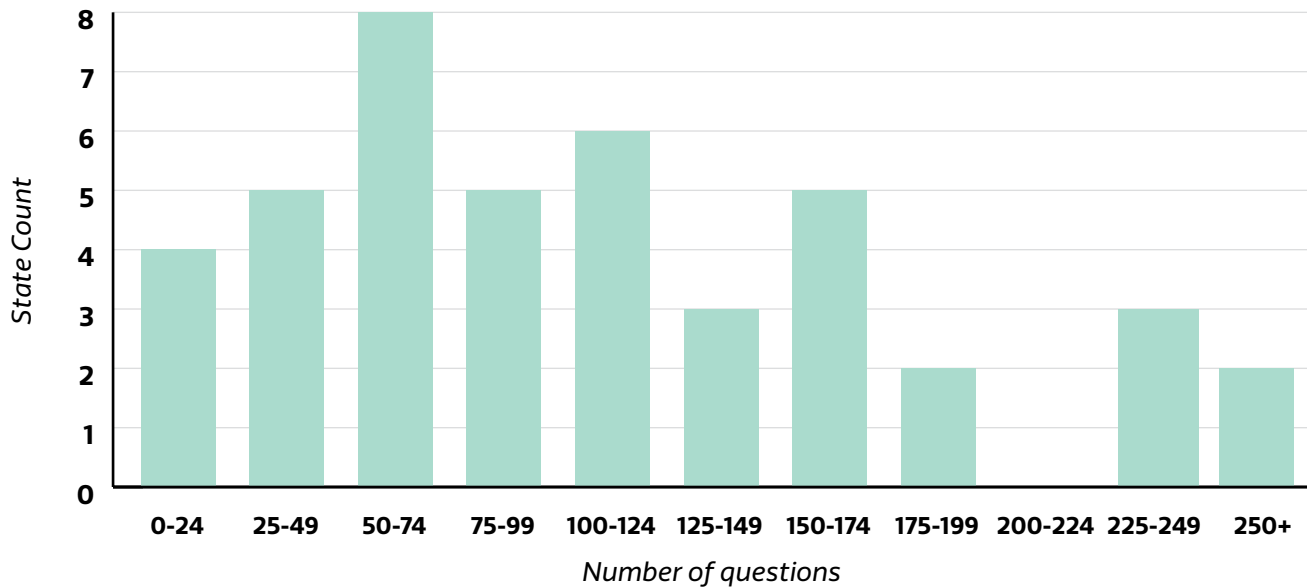


FIGURE 4. Counts do not include the YRBS. Further, for the few states that give two or more non-YRBS surveys, we used the lower survey item count so as not to over-represent those states in the figure. There is only one youth survey in the country with more items than the Minnesota Student Survey—and that is a sampled (rather than census) youth survey given in Arizona.

Frequency with which at least one statewide youth survey is given

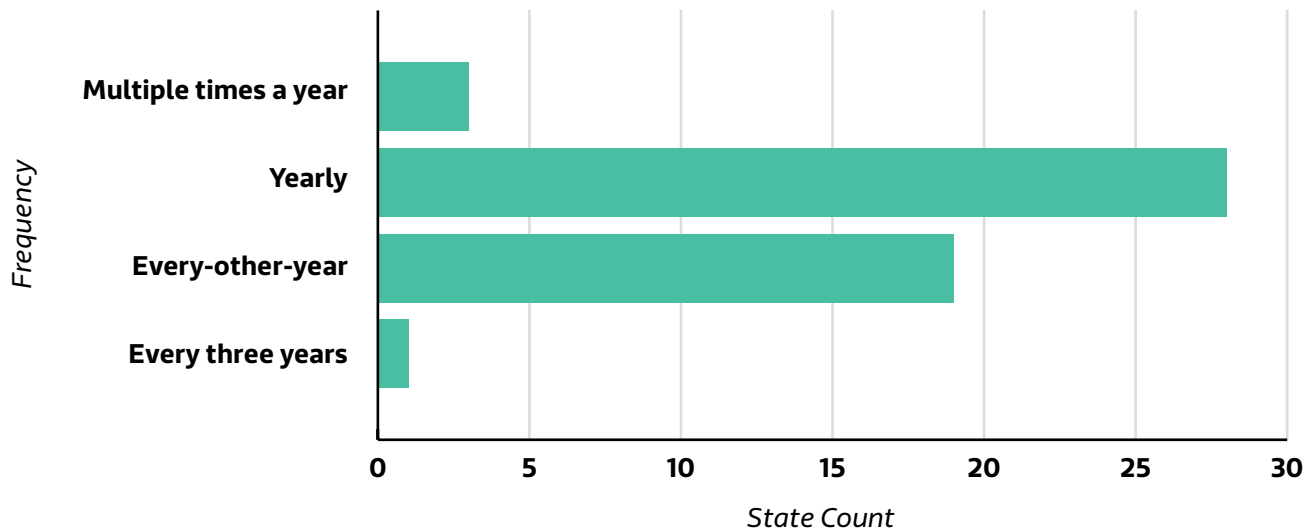


FIGURE 5. For states that have multiple surveys, the frequency of the most commonly given survey is included. Minnesota is the only state that gives a statewide survey as infrequently as every three years.

Sampling methodology for statewide youth survey(s)

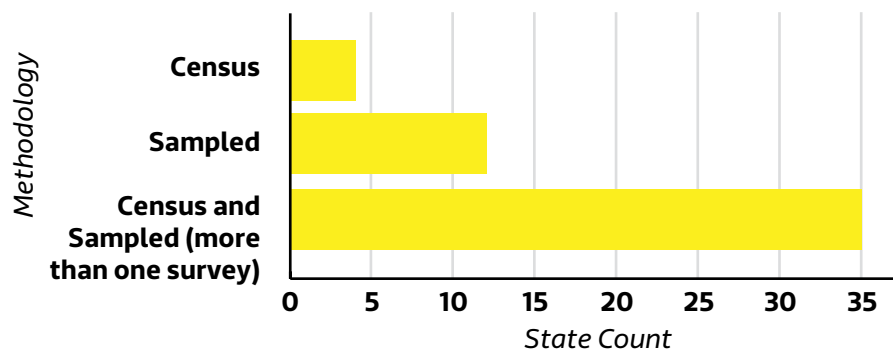


FIGURE 6: Only four states (Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming) use only a census approach (i.e. giving the survey to *all* students who opt in for surveyed grades). The modal approach across states is to give both a shorter census survey, plus a longer sampled survey taken by a random selection of students.

Grades in which a statewide youth survey is given

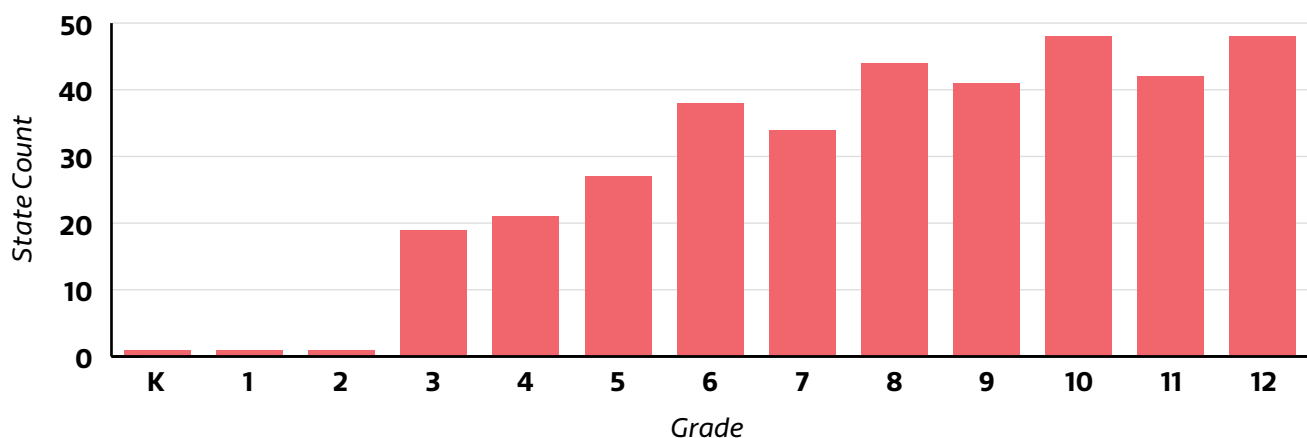


FIGURE 7.

SIDEBAR 1

YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY (YRBS)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) runs a survey called the **Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)**. True to its name, the survey focuses on determinants of youth health, including categories such as substance use, diet, and physical activity level.

The CDC conducts both a nationally-sampled version of the survey every two years, and provides technical assistance for states to administer a state-level version of the survey.⁸ A state-level YRBS can be customized (to a limited extent, within defined boundaries) by states, and involve larger sample sizes to enable more detailed conclusions.

In total, all but four states give the YRBS; Minnesota does not. As shown in Figure 3, many states use a sampled YRBS as their primary tool for getting at the youth health, behavior, and safety items that occur on the Minnesota Student Survey, and also administer a (usually shorter) census survey.

⁸. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2023. "Methodology of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Diving Deeper on Six Relevant States

After reviewing all state surveys, we selected six states that seemed to have either local contexts, survey histories, or survey designs that we saw as particularly relevant to Minnesota: Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Montana, North Dakota, and Oregon.

1. Georgia

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **I. Surveys given.** Georgia gives the Georgia Student Health Survey (GSHS) as well as the YRBS.
- **II. What's on it.** GSHS has two versions, one for grades 3-5, one for grades 6-12; the latter covers various domains including: school connectedness, peer social support, adult support, cultural acceptance, and social/civic learning, physical environment, school safety, bullying, and mental health
- **III. Who takes and how.** GSHS is administered every year to students in grades 3 through 12, with participation voluntary. GSHS is not required as part of ESSA accountability, but data from it are used to calculate a school climate star rating (1 through 5) as part of Georgia's "College and Career Readiness Performance Index" school improvement and accountability platform.
- **IV. Timing and results.** The survey is typically open October/November through February/March. Results are typically available 6-8 weeks after the survey closes.



KEY LESSONS AND TAKE-AWAYS

GSHS is managed by the GA Department of Education; they see its purpose being to guide school prevention, intervention, and improvement strategies. For example, GDE's Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions (PBIS) office uses the data for climate improvement efforts with schools. GDE recently shortened the survey in response to concerns from local school districts.

2. Illinois

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **I. Surveys given:** Illinois gives the well-known 5Essentials (5E) survey statewide. There is also another survey, Cultivate, schools/districts can optionally give on-demand that is largely aligned with 5Es. Illinois also gives the YRBS.
- **II. What's on it:** 5E's five domains are: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, supportive environment, involved families, and ambitious



instruction. These five domains emerged from decades of work (mostly out of UChicago) on determinants of learning.

- **III. Who takes and how:** All students grades 4 through 12; the 5E is also unique in that there is a paired survey given to educators and families. Participation is incentivized by the inclusion of participation rates in Illinois' ESSA accountability plan.
- **IV. Timing and results:** 5E is typically given in an eight-week window, mid-January through mid-March. Schools have access to disaggregated data via an online portal one month later; results are public on Illinois state report card website by September.

KEY LESSONS AND TAKE-AWAYS

5Es is an excellent, research-backed tool measuring constructs shown to be linked with learning and relevant to school improvement. We also appreciated Illinois' approach of having participation rates (but not question responses) be part of accountability, in an effort to increase participation while minimizing the incentive to sway or bias respondents' answers.

3. Iowa

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **I. Surveys given:** Iowa gives the Conditions for Learning Survey (CLS) every year, as well as the Iowa Youth Survey (IYS) and YRBS biannually. They acknowledged some overlap between IYS and YRBS that has led to questions about whether both surveys are needed.
- **II. What's on it:** The three primary domains covered by the CLS are: safety (including physical and emotional safety), engagement (including support from adults and collaboration with peers), and environment (including clear expectations and rules). The IYS includes more questions on youth behaviors and health factors. Interestingly, some CLS items are also included on IYS.
- **III. Who takes and how:** CLS is given every year to students in grades 3 through 12; IYS is given biannually to students in grades 6, 8, and 11. CLS is required for ESSA accountability (it counts for 18 percent and 8 percent of their total "points", for primary and secondary, respectively); IYS is optional for districts.
- **IV. Timing and results:** The CLS is open in April each year; in 2021, results were made public in December.

KEY LESSONS AND TAKE-AWAYS

In 2010, IA broke the shorter CLS survey off of the larger IYS, in an effort to create an instrument more relevant to school improvement. The process by which they did so—convening a working group, and asking them explicitly what was important to measure—also seemed appropriate to that purpose.



4. Montana



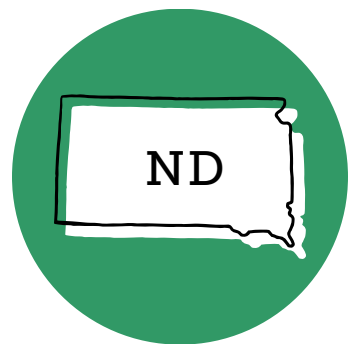
KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **I. Surveys given:** Montana gives both the Montana Prevention Needs Assessment (MPNA) and the YRBS. Both are given every-other-year, in alternating years.
- **II. What's on it:** MPNA includes largely items similar to the YRBS, but features some additional questions that relate more directly to school climate—including bullying, connection with adults, and sense of safety.
- **III. Who takes and how:** MPNA is given to students in grades 8, 10, and 12 (optionally for grades 7, 9, and 11); YRBS is given to grades 9-12. Districts choose whether to opt in to MPNA, but students in participating districts may opt out. YRBS is given to sampled high schools.
- **IV. Timing and results:** The MPNA is generally given February through April, with results distributed in September. Schools and districts can view school-level results in an online portal.

KEY LESSONS AND TAKE-AWAYS

Montana uses an intentional and coordinated “ground game” to encourage use of the MPNA. County prevention agents around the state use a common set of talking points to pitch school boards and superintendents on “how the survey benefits you and your students.”

5. North Dakota



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **I. Surveys given:** North Dakota gives the Student Engagement Survey (SES) every year—administered by Cognia, on contract to the state—as well as the YRBS in odd years.
- **II. What's on it:** SES is a very short survey, at only 21 items. It focuses on student experiences, behaviors, attitudes as it relates to engagement in school and learning.
- **III. Who takes and how:** SES is taken by all students in grades 3 through 12; it is required by the state and included as part of ESSA accountability. Survey administrators talked of calling individual districts and reminding them to take the survey (and of the consequences if participation drops below 95 percent).
- **IV. Timing and results:** The survey is open for one month, (usually mid-January through mid-February). Schools and districts have access to a portal where they can view school-level results, disaggregated by student group and subscale, and results are shown on public school report cards by September.

KEY LESSONS AND TAKE-AWAYS

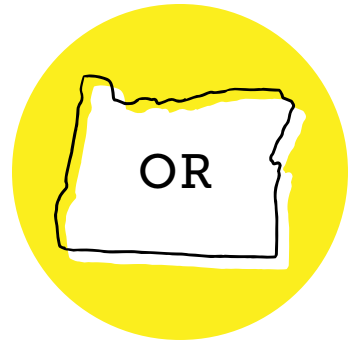
North Dakota's SES is short and directly actionable at the school level. Cognia, their administration partner, has many resources available to interpret and act on results. North Dakota's gentle-but-firm approach of di-

rect outreach to encourage use (combined with incentivizing by including the survey in ESSA accountability) has also yielded unrivaled participation rates (96% of districts reported 80%+ student participation rates in 2022).

6. Oregon

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **I. Surveys given:** Oregon gives only the Student Health Survey (SHS). They are one of only a few states (along with Minnesota) that do not give the YRBS.
- **II. What's on it:** SHS covers student health status and access (including mental health), injury and violence, school climate, healthy relationships/sexual health, and substance use.
- **III. Who takes and how:** The SHS is offered in even years to all public schools serving grades 6, 8, and 11. In 2022 about 40 percent of school districts participated.
- **IV. Timing and results:** SHS is given in the fall, typically from October through December, with results available to schools in late Spring (disaggregated in an online dashboard). Weighted state and county results are also made available.



KEY LESSONS AND TAKE-AWAYS

Oregon hasn't been afraid to revisit fundamentals of their survey; in 2020 they made the difficult decision to merge two statewide youth surveys into the current SHS. We also appreciate their focus on streamlining questions and a very intentional process and criteria for adjusting questions each year.

A Vast (and Creative) Variety of Funding Approaches

We sought to understand not only how states design and use their youth surveys—but also how they pay for them. Rather than identifying a pattern, we found every state did it differently.

While a few had dedicated state survey appropriations or patched together various state funding sources, most drew on one or more federal funding streams. Some of those included:

- **I. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grants**
- **II. Centers for Disease Control support, by administering their state survey as a YRBS (see Sidebar 1 on page 11).** States did this even as they customized their YRBS with added questions, multiple survey modules/versions, oversampling strategies, etc.

- III. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) funds, including Title II(A), Supporting Effective Instruction; and Title IV(A), Student Support and Academic Enrichment.

Given the vastly varied strategies we saw used to pay for staff time and administration expenses associated with surveys, we determined that a detailed analysis of funding sources was beyond the scope of this paper. Though, we were inspired by what's possible. States committed to making their youth survey(s) valued and used found myriad creative funding approaches to make that happen.

States committed to making their youth survey(s) valued and used found myriad creative funding approaches to make that happen.

Conclusions for Minnesota



We present the following set of conclusions about Minnesota's survey today and where it might go.

Equipped with a sense of how other states use youth surveys, we poured over notes from our conversations with Minnesotans. Our conclusions are grouped into the same three areas used above: survey use, content, and administration. Because ultimately **it's districts and schools that opt into and administer the MSS**, our analysis focuses primarily on their use of the MSS. Our conversations with county health and human services staff affirmed this focus: county use of the MSS is intricately linked with and dependent on district participation.

Use

MSS is not currently seen as highly valuable for improving learning at the school/district level—but it should be.

The MSS has clearly made a valuable contribution. In particular, researchers have used it to yield powerful insights⁹ around general trends and issues among youth. Administrators (mostly state and county officials) use survey results for grant and program administration and reporting. We even saw evidence—for example, around vaping and mental health—of MSS being used to inform state policy and investment prioritization decisions.

Few could remember details about the survey or what information they could glean from it. Many had never even heard of it.

But, in speaking with dozens of educators, administrators, youth program leaders, social workers, and others who work directly with youth, we were surprised at how few of them used the MSS to improve their

⁹ See the Minnesota Youth Development Research group for some examples of these results: <https://sites.google.com/view/mnydrgr>

programs or schools. Few could remember details about the survey or what information they could glean from it. Many had never even heard of it.

To be sure, we heard wonderful examples of how some had used results to inform their planning. One school district even held a student-led “data summit,” where students used MSS data to analyze problems in their district and craft solutions. But these were very much “model districts,” which we were pointed to repeatedly by different people; their story wasn’t the norm.

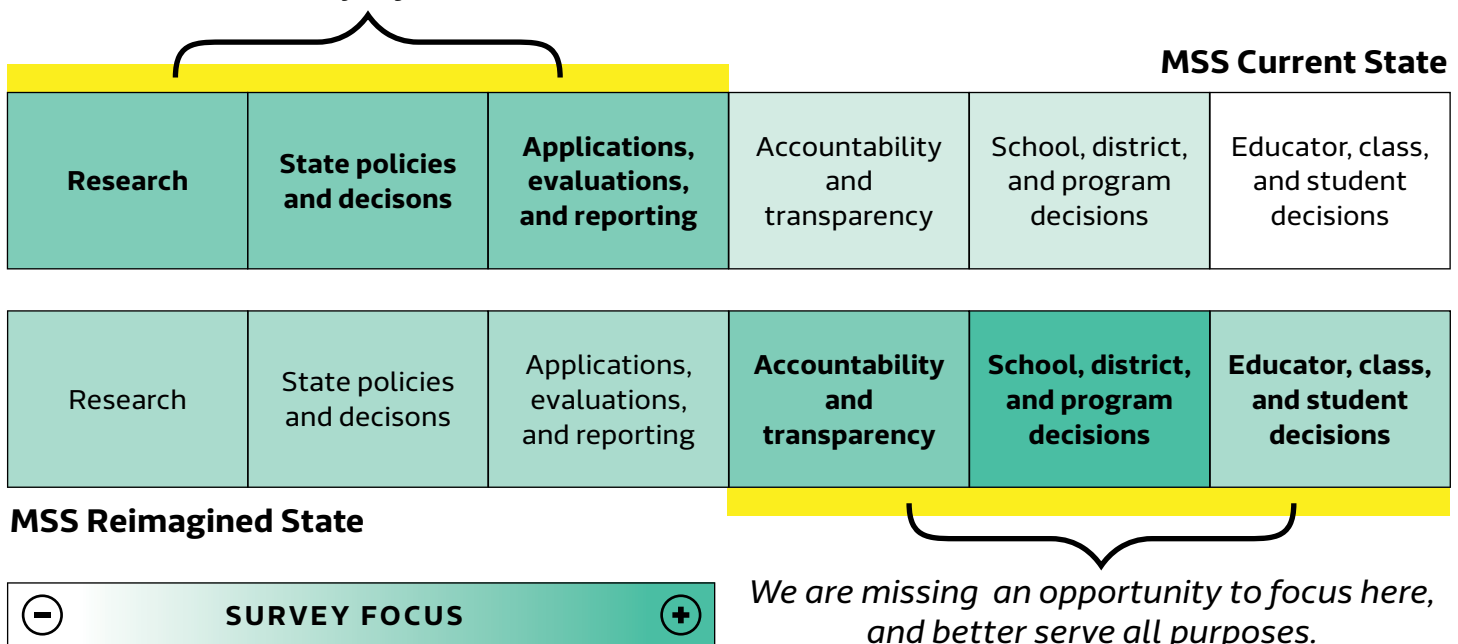
If the core intention for the MSS is to benefit youth, there is currently a missed opportunity for it to provide useful, actionable information to those who interact directly with them each day—educators, administrators, youth workers, social workers, families, and students themselves.

We acknowledge that this would be a shift in the MSS’ primary purpose, and would require changes to its design. We also acknowledge that some purposes are at odds (see Table 1 earlier in this report for details); but they don’t have to be. We saw many examples of states using their state survey(s) more explicitly to inform school and district improvement and increase transparency, while still providing value to health officials, researchers, and policymakers.

The next two headings explore what a shift in the primary purpose and use might mean for the design of the survey—in particular with regards to its **content** and **administration**.

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

The purpose and design of the MSS today is focused here.



We are missing an opportunity to focus here, and better serve all purposes.

FIGURE 8. Shifting the primary purpose and use of the MSS to more explicitly prioritize improving learning and informing improvement at the school, district, and program level.

Content

MSS will be most impactful if it clearly measures climate, engagement, and other constructs *relevant* to improvement at the school and district level.

Most of those we spoke to saw tremendous value in surveys, generally. Some of the common constructs we heard schools and districts identify as important were: school climate, student engagement, sense of belonging, and strength of relationships.

However, as we described above, the schools and districts we spoke to were by and large using surveys other than the MSS to gauge how they were doing in these areas. Every school and district we spoke with gave at least one local student survey; many gave two or three. Common vendors used included Tripod, YouthTruth, and Panorama—each with their own added expense.

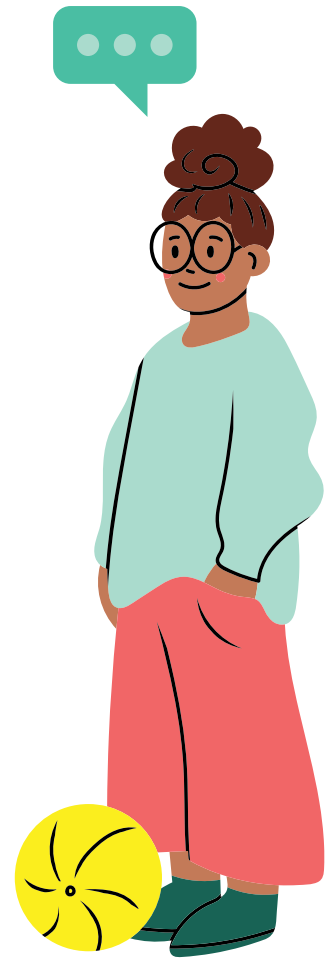
Schools turned to these surveys because they gauged climate and engagement constructs in ways that led more naturally to changes in program designs and educational practices. For example, the MSS question “adults at my school listen to the students” links clearly to a changeable adult behavior; in contrast, the question “being a student is one of the most important parts of who I am” captures a likely symptom of disengagement.

Those we spoke to—both educators and county staff alike—also definitely saw value in questions not directly related to school and learning. In particular, we heard questions on health, nutrition, and safety conveyed important context on students’ lives. Some educators did raise concerns about how many such questions were necessary to get a sense of their community needs (right now they dominate the survey), especially when many of the factors surveyed were beyond the immediate control of those who work directly with youth.

The content of the MSS has been facing pushback from external sources as well. Bolstered by having had a front row seat to education during the Covid pandemic and our current broader political landscape, families are questioning all student surveys, especially some of the more sensitive items on the MSS about substance use and student identity.¹⁰

On the other hand, we heard repeatedly that the inclusion of questions on gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity (rather than just broad racial categories), have brought important attention to inequities among student groups. The survey has been particularly important in showing we desperately need to better support and serve LGBTQ+ youth.

School and district administrators—facing pressure both to maximize learning time for academic recovery,



Ultimately, districts and families opt into the survey. Making the content of the survey more explicitly relevant to them is not only responding to a missed opportunity. It’s also necessary for the MSS’s survival.

¹⁰. See for example: <https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/members/profile/news/15286/47588> and <https://www.postbulletin.com/news/local/two-area-school-districts-opt-out-of-state-survey-due-to-controversial-topics>

and facing pushback from families—are putting all surveys they use under scrutiny.¹¹ Many we spoke to opted not to give the MSS this year, citing both the lower relevance of the survey to improvement, combined with the growing family pushback. County health administrators we spoke to also lamented this trend; one rural county we spoke with shared they no longer use MSS data due to low district participation.

Ultimately, districts and families opt into the survey. Making the content of the survey more explicitly focused on improving schools—and thus more relevant to them—is not only responding to a missed opportunity. It’s also necessary for the MSS’s survival. Without adjustments, we believe that opt-outs will grow and the survey will be less relevant and valid for any purpose.

Next we consider how the administration of the survey can complement more relevant content.

Administration

MSS must be administered in a way that gives timely, actionable, complete, and comparable data to *inform* improvement at the school/district level.

Another major critique we heard about the MSS—and a reason to opt-out of taking it and/or to use local or third-party surveys instead—is that it’s given only every three years and only to students in certain grades (rather than all students).

Many schools and districts cited a desire for a survey that would give them more regular information on whether changes they were making had an impact. Surveys given yearly, or even two or three times a year, provide a tighter “formative loop.” Additionally, the fact that students in some grades were not surveyed left teachers of those grades feeling like they had no handle on their own students’ experiences.

Another feature we heard of surveys districts used in lieu of the MSS was the ability to compare and benchmark across schools, especially those with similar demographics. Schools were frustrated that comparison data from the MSS wasn’t available until much later than they received their own data, making it more difficult to use in planning.

To be clear, we don’t believe the goal should be for MSS to be the only survey that schools administer in Minnesota. In particular—looking at the bottom row of purposes for surveys in Table 1, around teacher/

A shorter, more timely, more actionable MSS can provide value for educators and families that inspires participation and use.



¹¹. National Institute of Statistical Sciences. 2022. “School Survey Participation and Burden.” Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

student-level decisions—there is an appropriate place for very lightweight, student-level survey instruments, often called “social-emotional learning (SEL) screeners.” Usually linked with a student ID, these surveys give actionable information to inform individual student interventions and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) plans.

The MSS doesn’t need to do everything, but it does need to find a unique place and purpose where it adds value for districts, schools, educators, families, and above all students. We believe a shorter, more timely, more actionable MSS can do that—providing benefit for educators and families that truly inspires use, offsets time away from learning to take the survey, and assuages family and community concerns.

Further, a MSS focused more on school improvement need not eschew other purposes, but embrace that they will be best met—through greater participation, and political sustainability of the survey over time—if relevance to school and district improvement is prioritized as the central purpose.

Recommendations

Drawing from these conclusions, we present the following set of recommendations. The central idea that all the recommendations drive towards is re-centering the purpose of the survey on school and district improvement, while still serving other important purposes.

Over the long run, we recommend that Minnesota’s survey branch into two separate instruments: one given yearly that is more explicitly intended for improvement at the school/district level; and one a sampled survey with a wider breadth of questions covering youth health, behaviors, and life experiences. The majority of other states use this paired survey approach.

We present our recommendations in phases, with each phase itself a direct and immediate improvement, while also building towards this larger vision. These phases are summarized in Figure 9, with specific recommendations for each phase detailed in Table 3.

Over the long run, we recommend that Minnesota’s survey branch into two separate instruments.



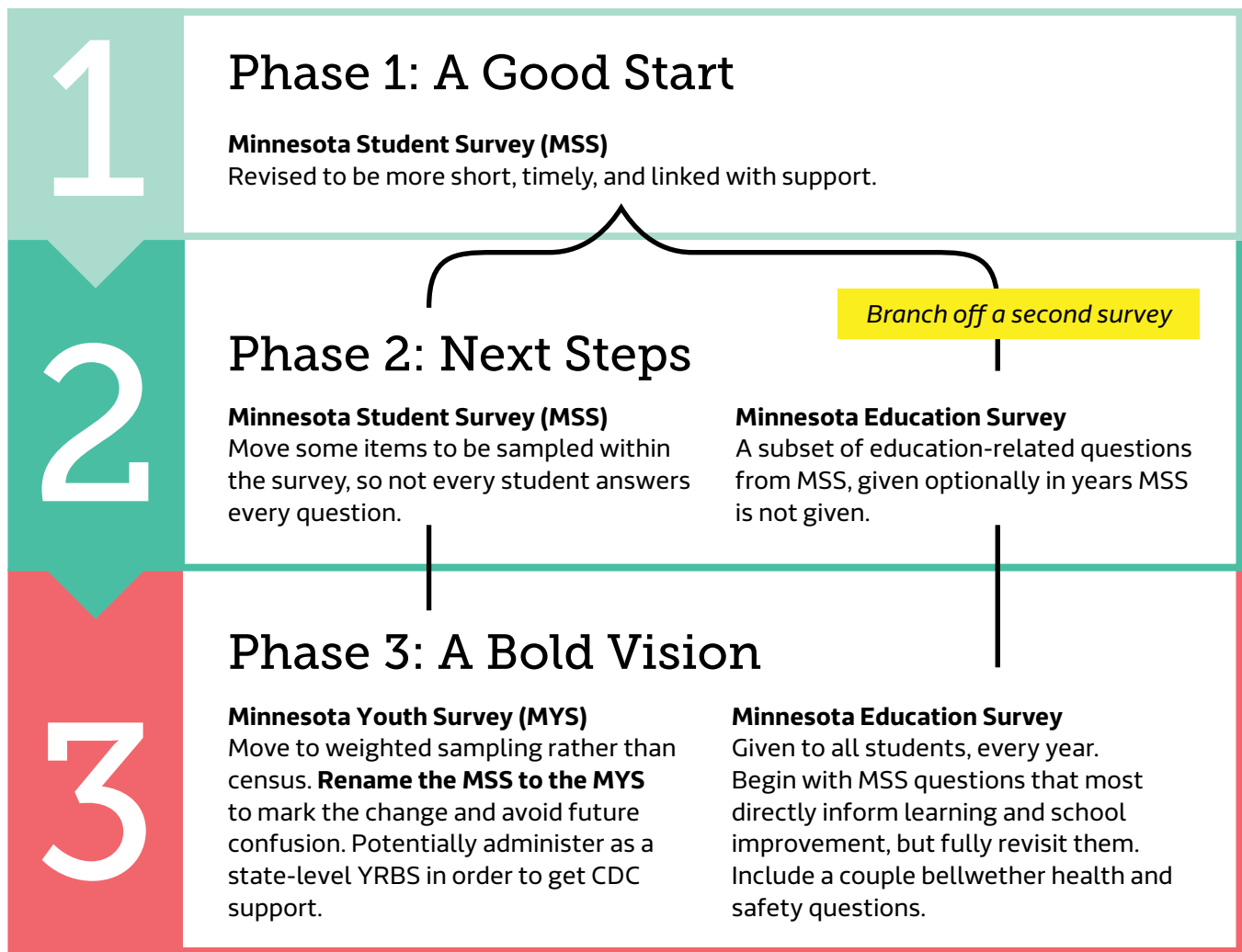


Figure 9. Summary of the evolution of Minnesota’s student survey(s) through the recommendations in each phase.

SIDEBAR 2 SMART SAMPLING

The recommendation above to split Minnesota’s survey into two—one of which is sampled, to reduce student and educator burden—can seem disruptive, especially to those who rely on the data. Some of our concerns about this were assuaged by seeing many clever sampling strategies used by other states. In particular, with sampling it’s still possible to:

- I. Generate data at a region and county level.** We even saw one state (Florida) with an alternating sampling strategy; they used a smaller sample able to yield state-level results in even years, and a larger sample able to yield county-level results in odd years—all with the same survey instrument.
- II. Let those who want the data take the survey.** It’s possible to let particular schools, districts, or regions opt-in to administer the survey (for example, if they need it to report on a grant program), even if a sampling strategy is in use statewide. Those who opted-in are only aggregated into the sample if they are selected—meeting the needs of both randomized sampling and local data collection.

Table 3: Specific recommendations in the areas of use, content, and administration

	Level	A. Use	B. Content	C. Administration
1	Phase 1: A Good Start	<p>1A. Explicitly refocus the main purpose of the survey on informing school/district improvement</p> <p>I. Expand the MSS interagency team and/or create a separate advisory board of practicing educators, students, and community members.</p> <p>II. Also include people from the many state departments which support schools directly (including divisions within MDE and the Regional Centers of Excellence).</p> <p>III. Make the purpose of informing school/district improvement a central part of the RFP for the 2025 implementation partner.</p>	<p>1B. Reduce the survey length and streamline the yearly amendment process</p> <p>I. Inventory every existing question, including (a) its purpose, (b) the origin and history, and (c) who uses it for which programs, grants, and other purposes.</p> <p>II. Create a set of criteria and a process for adding new questions, which centers the purposes per 1(A).</p> <p>III. Set a firm max length of 150 items (see 2B for more on how item sampling/versions can help).¹²</p>	<p>1C. Shorten and standardize timing of administration and reporting</p> <p>I. Make the administration window for the MSS January through March (or the latest possible date when full results could be provided in May; see bullet below).¹³</p> <p>II. Provide all results, including school-level and comparison data, to all schools and districts who took the survey by the end of May.</p>
2	Phase 2: Next Steps	<p>2A. Make the connection between the survey and support from state agencies clearer</p> <p>I. Develop an online tool to disaggregate and compare survey data, and access guidance and resources on how to interpret and act on it.</p> <p>II. Provide direct technical support (from MDE, as well as other state agencies) that draws on the survey; in particular, use the survey as a common needs assessments and diagnosis tool across all divisions that support schools.</p> <p>III. Develop talking points and outreach plans for “pitching” the survey to schools and districts, making clear the tools and supports available.</p>	<p>2B. Sample some items within the survey to reduce item count and student burden</p> <p>I. Every question that we don’t truly need to know of all students, or for which cross tabulation isn’t critical, should be moved to a sampled basis.</p> <p>II. We heard there was discussion about doing this in prior years—shifting some questions into different “modules” or “versions”, with each student taking a subset of the questions less important to ask of each student. This sort of approach should be seen through.</p>	<p>2C. Administer an optional, short version of the survey in years MSS is not given</p> <p>I. Could call it the Minnesota Education Survey (MES).</p> <p>II. Include 20 to 30 of the MSS questions most relevant for school practice change and decision-making, plus a couple of key, bellwether health and safety questions.</p> <p>III. Build the survey platform to allow schools to add their own questions (or add pre-built questions on particular topics).</p> <p>IV. Districts and schools could optionally give to all students, grades 5 through 12.</p>
3	Phase 3: A Bold Vision	<p>3A. Continue to focus on school/districts decisions, accountability, and transparency</p> <p>I. Continue to align support and resources from MDE and other agencies with the MES and MSS.</p> <p>II. Clean up and clarify how survey results are shown on the state “report card” site (which also needs an overhaul in general).</p> <p>III. Use state survey participation rates as part of the “fifth indicator” for ESSA staged identification for targeted and comprehensive support (like Illinois).</p>	<p>3B. Shift the MES to be given every year, and boldly revisit the questions on it</p> <p>I. Convene a workgroup (majority educators and students) to consider the domains and questions most important for improving learning and schools.</p> <p>II. Begin with the education questions on the MSS, but ask boldly whether they are the right ones. Consider even using another instrument, like the 5Essentials, outright.</p>	<p>3C. Shift the MSS to a weighted-sample survey, still every three years</p> <p>I. Could be renamed to the Minnesota Youth Survey (MYS).</p> <p>II. Adopt a rigorous weighted sampling strategy to make sure all groups are seen.</p> <p>III. Allow districts/schools to opt in to the MYS even if not sampled (though, then exclude them from sample).</p> <p>IV. Ultimately, at least consider using an adapted YRBS in place of the MYS.</p>

¹² Nearly every educator we spoke with for this paper raised concerns about the current length of the MSS in terms of reliability of results, especially in younger grades. We heard many stories of youth clicking randomly through questions towards the end, zoning out, etc. Stemming mostly from concerns like these, the YRBS—the most-given youth survey in the country—imposes a state YRBS cap of 99 items.

¹³ We acknowledge this overlaps with the time window for ACCESS testing in Minnesota. Most schools we asked about this said they completed the MSS during this Q1 period anyway. I.e. practically speaking the impact of this shift would be minor—but have benefits to all in terms of earlier comparison data availability.

We Must Imagine a Blank Slate

Minnesota’s youth survey has been given since 1989. Any change—especially some of the larger ones proposed above—seems intimidating. There is the understandable instinct not to “mess up” something that’s been going for so long and provided so much insight over the years.

But we simply must root decisions about the survey in the goal of best serving our young people today—not preserving an instrument created decades ago.

We believe the best way to do this is to make the survey more relevant for those who work with youth every day—educators, administrators, social workers, families, and students themselves. In short, our core recommendation is to shift the central purpose of Minnesota’s survey to improving learning and schools.

That doesn’t mean we have to throw out everything about the MSS. In particular, it is **critical** to continue to collect data on youth health, safety, substance use, and other risk behaviors. This purpose is not lost in shifting to the dual-survey, sampled model proposed above. Strategies like oversampling for county results, letting programs/districts opt-in to administer the survey and get their own data even in the context of state sampling, alternating-in questions to keep the ability to do longitudinal analysis, and asking a few health questions on the proposed shorter education-focused survey help meet this purpose.

But ultimately, a shifted central purpose is most likely to directly benefit youth. Further, practically speaking it’s the purpose that most naturally leads to meeting all other purposes—by maintaining the participation rates and political support that will be necessary for the survey’s survival.

The recommendations above are one path. We hope they are helpful. And, there are many educators, families, and young people who can share more: what questions are important to ask, how they want the data, and what support they need in acting on the results.

We hope those looking to improve the survey will invite these students, families, and educators to the table as they boldly reimagine the survey in the service of this shifted purpose.

In short, our core recommendation in this paper is to shift the central purpose of Minnesota’s survey to improving learning and schools.



We're grateful to Great Minnesota Schools and other donors of Education Evolving for their generous financial support of our work on defining and measuring student-centered outcomes.

Report design by Jaime Chismar, Super Deluxe Design Studio.

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