Illinois 5Essentials Survey Focus Group Report – February 2014

This document provides an overview of the focus group sessions that were held across the State of Illinois on February 7 and February 11, 2014 to gather input on the content of the 5Essentials Survey. The purpose of these focus groups was to engage a diverse group of stakeholders across the state to review the survey questions and gather their specific suggestions for modifying the survey. During the course of these sessions, a number of issues and concerns were raised by participants. We have documented these concerns for the State's further review. In this document we provide a summary of the : 1) background on the 2012-13 survey administration and issues raised; 2) process used to generate focus group feedback; 3) recommendations for changes to the 5Essentials Survey for both short and long term implementation; and 4) additional recommended changes to the 2013-14 administration. The raw data from the focus groups is included in Appendix A. Student Survey Item Feedback; Appendix B. Teacher Survey Item Feedback; open issues and concerns raised in the groups are included in Appendix C. Open Issues Summary; and the list of participants is included in Appendix D.

Background

The Illinois 5Essentials Survey was administered for the first time during the 2012-13 year. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) selected the 5Essentials Survey, via a Request for Sealed Proposals, to meet legislative requirements requiring:

- Districts to administer a survey of learning conditions, at least biennially, starting in the 2012-13 year (105 ILCS 5/2-3.153)
- The state modify the state school report card to include "two or more indicators from any school climate survey developed by the State" (105 ILCS 5/10-17a)

Many lessons were learned through the first year's implementation. Specifically, feedback from the field helped to identify individual survey questions that were felt not to be appropriate for all school contexts across the state. After review of feedback with the advisory group in 2013, 4 specific amendments were made to the survey content. These changes included:

a. Teacher Influence contained an item about hiring professional personnel, not relevant in districts where hiring decisions are made centrally. *Solution:* We removed that item.
b. Parent Involvement in School had an item about report card pick up day, not universally relevant across the state. *Solution:* We removed the entire measure and will be testing a new measure this year.
c. Response categories for the English/Math Instruction measures were: Never, Once or twice a semester, Once or twice a month, Once or twice a week, and Almost every day. These may not apply in schools with block scheduling. *Solution:* We plan to test new response categories on the 2013-14 survey.
d. Human and Social Resources in the Community includes the word "neighborhood", not universally relevant across the state. *Solution:* We plan to test this change on the 2013-14 survey.

In addition to the four amendments outlined above, it was clear that more work needed to be done in order to ensure the relevance of specific survey items across all contexts in the state. In an effort to engage stakeholders, the 5Essentials Team from The University of Chicago worked collaboratively with ISBE to convene three focus groups across the state during February 2014.

Process

Three focus groups were held across the state in Naperville, Belleville, and Springfield. Members of the advisory committee were asked to invite individuals to participate in these sessions. The goal was to have a mix of teachers, principals, and superintendents, so various perspectives were represented at each of the sessions. Each session had approximately 20 participants, with representation from the IPA, IASA, IEA, and IFT (Appendix D).

The sessions were scheduled for two hours each, with the first thirty minutes used to frame the day and the process that would be used to gather feedback. The next thirty minutes was opened up for questions and general feedback on the survey, with an hour reserved for groups to review the individual items on both the student and teacher surveys. During the item review, participants were divided into small groups and given either the student or teacher survey to review. Each session had two groups review each of the surveys. So, at the end of the three sessions, both the teacher and student surveys were reviewed six times.

Participants were directed to read through each of the survey items, and record their recommended changes on a flip chart. Participants were asked to note the question, identify what type of change they were suggesting (an addition to a question, identifying not applicable items, alternate wording, or change to response category), and an explanation for the change. Feedback from these reviews has been consolidated into one document, displaying the question and recommendations from each of the six groups that reviewed them (Appendices A and B).

The consolidated feedback was then reviewed by UChicago Impact and the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) who analyzed the recommendations based on level of difficulty and significance of the proposed change with respect to best practices of survey questionnaire design as well as prior findings on how the measure statistically holds together and its relationships with student outcomes.

Recommendations for Changing Items

The 5Essentials Survey is comprised of groups of questions that relate to underlying constructs and are compiled together to form a scale or measure. In this way, the survey is not a simple compendium of individual questions but instead a collection of measures that are aggregated into larger concepts called 'essentials.' Research establishing the importance or predictiveness of the ideas contained in the 5Essentials Survey focuses on these measures or essentials rather than on individual questions. Because of this, we need to balance the comments and suggestions from focus group participants about individual questions with the need to maintain the core ideas underlying each measure that have been shown to predict desired outcomes such as positive gains on student tests or improvements in student attendance or the relationship between level of, say, safety, and student achievement. At the same time, it is also important that the individual questions reflect participants' experiences and contexts. Sometimes a single word can change respondents' understanding, which in itself could have implications for the measure's meaning.

We appreciate and value the feedback we received from focus group participants. They raised many important questions and offered many helpful suggestions for changing the survey.

Some changes will be made immediately and will be incorporated into the 2013-14 survey. Others will be tested on a sample of respondents on the 2013-14 survey to see if changing the words still maintains

the statistical integrity of the related measure. In addition, we will take some suggestions under consideration for further study, reviewing what others around the country have found, with the goal of accepting or testing them in 2014-15. All suggestions have to be considered in light of two key questions: 1) Do they change the construct being measured? And 2) Are they specific enough to be actionable?

The following tables will outline which items we recommend be:

- Modified for the 2013-14 survey statewide;
- Tested in the 2013-14 survey in rostered school districts;
- Investigated for testing or modification in the 2014-15 survey.

We recommend making the following content changes statewide in the 2013-14 survey.

Survey	Question number and measure name (see Appendices A and B)	Question text	Changes
Teacher survey	2: Outreach to Parents	Please mark the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following statements about your school: 2b: School staff members encourage feedback from parents and the community 2f: School staff members communicate with parents about the support needed to advance the school mission	We will add examples of what school staff members are (teachers, counselors, office staff, etc.) to both items because
	14: Teacher Influence	How much influence do teachers have over school policy in each of the areas below?	An item was removed about hiring professional personnel
	12: Parent Involvement in School	For the students you teach this year, how many of their parents:	An item about report card pickup day was removed because many schools do not have report card pickup day. Additional items will be added to replace the measure that was lost when report card pickup day was dropped
Student survey	2: Academic Personalism:	2c: My teachers always keep their promises 2d: My teachers always listen to students' ideas	We will remove "always" because it conflates the "always" with the response categories.

We recommend that we test these changes with a sample of respondents in the 2013-14 survey to see if they can subsequently become permanent changes.

Survey	Question number and measure name (see Appendices A and B)	Question, item, or response category text	Changes
Teacher survey	2: Outreach to Parents	2a: The principal pushes teachers to communicate regularly with parents	We will test changing "pushes" to "encourages".

		2c: Teachers really try to understand parents' problems and concerns 2e: Teachers work closely with parents to meet students' needs	Response categories currently strongly disagree to strongly agree. We will test if we can change these response categories to a "to what extent" question.
	13: Principal Instructional Leadership	The principal at this school:	We have heard a number of contradictory comments about this measure—some people say these tasks are done by someone other than the principal; others say that the principal needs to oversee these tasks regardless of who implements them. We will test a new version of the stem to say 'principal or leadership group' on 2013/2014 survey and will conduct focus groups over the 2014-15 school year to gather more information.
	21: Influence of parents on decision making in school (new measure being tested across the state)	21d. To what extent does this school develop formal networks to link all families with each other (for example: sharing parent directories or providing a website for parents to connect with one another)?	We will try to find more examples of formal networks.
		21b: To what extent does this school involve parents in choosing school curricula?	We will change "choosing" to "commenting on".
Student survey	1: Safety	1a: How safe do you feel in the hallways and bathrooms of the school	We will test splitting this item into two, asking about "hallways" separately from "bathrooms".
	10 and 11: English Instruction and Math Instruction	Response categories: Never, once or twice a semester, once or twice a month, once or twice a week, almost every day.	We understand this may be confusing to students who are on block schedules. However, we are reluctant to try a whole new set of response categories that may make the measure unusable. So we will test a different set of response categories: Never, rarely, often, always.
	12: Human and Social Resources in the Community	12 a. Adults in this neighborhood know who the local children are. 12c. people in this neighborhood can be trusted	This measure will no longer be considered as part of the 5Essentials. Instead, it will be asked as a supplemental measure that can help school leaders understand more about the circumstances of their students' communities.

		12d. There are adults in this neighborhood that children can look up to 12e The equipment and buildings in the neighborhood park or playground are well kept.	We will test switching "neighborhood" with "community" this year.

We recommend further thought and study, leading toward testing and/or changing in 2014-15 survey.

Survey	Question number and measure name (see Appendices A and B)	Question, item, or response category text	Changes
Teacher survey	1: Collective Responsibility	1c. How many teachers in this school feel responsible to help each other do their best 1d. …feel responsible that all students learn 1e…feel responsible for helping students develop self-control 1f….feel responsible when student in this school fail	A comment was raised about changing "feel responsible" to "take responsibility". We liked this suggestion, but wanted to think more about the difference between these two phrases.
	7 and 8: Teacher-Principal Trust	See Appendix B.	We need to think more about how to modify this to better include buildings with larger administrative groups without making the questions too complex or diluting the meaning.
	12: Parent Involvement in School	For the students you teach this year, how many of their parents:	There were comments about changing "parent" to include "guardian". We want to think about this some more before testing.
	13: Principal Instructional Leadership	13c: Understands how children learn 13e: Presses teachers to implement what they've learned in professional development	We're already testing changing the question stem from "Principal at this school" to "Principal and leadership group" in 2013/14. We don't want to change too many things about a measure in one year. The following changes will be tested in 2014/15: We will test changing "children" to "students" We will test changing "presses" to "encourages"
	14: Teacher Influence	How much influence do teachers have over school policy in each of the areas below:	There are two suggestions about changing the question stem (changing "influence" to "offer/give input" and removing "school policy") that warrant further thought.

Student survey	6: Academic Press	6b. In your [target class] how often do you have to work hard to do well?	This item is trying to get at the amount of effort it takes to be successful. It is also structurally difficult. We need more time to think about it.
	7: Clarity	7a: How much do you agree with the following statements about your [target class]: I learn a lot from feedback on my work	Suggestion: omit 'a lot' We agree that we should find a way to modify 'a lot' we are not sure how to do it without changing the meaning. A possibility is putting in a separate bank. We need more time to think about how to do that.
Both student and teacher surveys	n/a	n/a	We will work on developing a separate measure (for students and/or teachers) for career readiness.

We also heard a number of content concerns that were not necessarily constrained to a specific item or measure.

- **"There should be a not applicable/don't know response category."**
  - Respondents tend to use these categories as either the extreme positive or extreme negative end of the scale, which can substantially bias the results. Respondents are free to not respond to individual items that do not apply. We can add a statement to the question stem that if the respondent doesn't know or the item does not apply to him or her, (s)he can leave it blank. We can also do more analysis on missing data: are data missing more in some places than others?
- **"Response categories should be changed."**
  - Sometimes changing these categories loses more than it gains. First, it makes trends over time impossible to calculate. Second, it is not clear that items will still make a coherent measure if the response categories are different. If we change the categories for all respondents we risk losing a good measure. We have proposed testing some such changes—if the measure still holds, then it can be used with the new categories in the next year; if it doesn't, then we still have information that is useful for schools.
- **"We can't do anything about this—the state (or district) has control over this construct."**
  - This issue was raised by a number of focus group participants in a number of contexts, notably Program Coherence and Collective Responsibility. We think this merits further exploration but can't accomplish it before the 2013-14 survey window opens.
- **"The survey doesn't reflect the Common Core standards."**
  - We will be testing some questions related to the Common Core and will include them as appropriate. Many of the questions on instruction were developed from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards or the National Council of Teachers of English and predate the Common Core standards.

Further Changes for 2013-14 Administration

It should be noted that feedback received after the 2012-13 administration was not limited to the content of the survey. Other concerns were raised and UChicago Impact and ISBE agreed on several other changes to the administration and reporting of the 5Essentials.

- There was concern with using Chicago Public Schools as the benchmark for the whole state. An Illinois benchmark has been created and will be used in future reporting.
- In the re-benchmarked version of the survey, we calculated separate state averages for four categories of schools based on grades served: 1) primary, 2) middle, 3) elementary and 4) high, and schools in each grade-level category are compared to the relevant benchmark. When we compute statistically similar schools we use this grade level configuration, type of school setting (urban, rural, suburban, town, and CPS), and percent of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

- The look and wording of 5Essentials Reports will be modified. The color scheme will change from green/red to shades of blue. Wording will change from strong/weak to more/less implementation
- To address concerns over the security of the survey, we will be conducting a pilot with 6 districts across the state to test a rostered survey. Results of this pilot will help determine the feasibility of moving to a rostered survey for the entire state next year.
- Two research studies will be conducted. The first will examine the use of the survey data across the state, and the second to examine the relationship between survey results and student test score gains using data from across the state.