

# Ten questions to ask before doing a school survey

**Here are some key questions you should ask before conducting a school survey. Thinking about your answers will assure that your survey is successful and that you are comparing “apples with apples.”**

**The questions and the answers are based on Banach, Banach & Cassidy’s (BB&C’s) long history of working with school district across North America.**

**We invite you to contact us if you have additional questions or need more survey research-related information.**

1. Do you know what you want to learn, from whom, and why?

These are the first three steps in the survey research process. They are also the most important steps.

Do you want to learn general perceptions about your schools or do you want to zero in on a few specific topics such as satisfaction with the curriculum and teacher-parent communication? Do you want this information from all residents, just parents, or registered voters? (If your survey is related to a school financial issues, do you want to survey all residents, registered voters, or registered voters who are likely to vote in the election?) Responding to the “why” helps you decide how you can use the information to your strategic advantage.

2. What are the advantages/disadvantages of each survey method?

Personal, one-on-one interviews allow for in-depth exploration of a topic and the recording of interviewer observations. They are typically quite expensive.

Written surveys are best used when your target audience is “captive.” When this is not the case, they tend to be returned by a self-selected sample and it is usually impossible to assign confidence limits to the findings. Written surveys take time (print the questionnaire, send public notice of the survey, mail the questionnaire, mail a reminder, etc.) and cost more than casual observers think.

Online surveys, by their very nature, limit the population to those with online access. They tend to be returned by a self-selected sample and limit the format of the questionnaire. Return rates for online surveys tend to be low and, hence, confidence limits can rarely be assigned to the findings.

Telephone surveys are quick, accurate, and relatively inexpensive. However, in recent years most Americans have replaced their household land line with a cell phone. This makes it more difficult to obtain the “home” telephone numbers of respondents.

3. Will you conduct a representative sampling?

Telephone surveys tend to be representative samplings. In written surveys, the respondents are self-selected. Hence, you may not know if the results are accurate or if they are biased in the direction of one viewpoint or another. For example, you likely will not know if most of your written surveys came back from people who favor school uniforms or those opposed to school uniforms... or those who don't care one way or another? The same is true for online surveys—the respondents come from a universe that has online access and are self-selected.

4. How accurate will your survey results be?

An “industry standard” survey is one with a 95% level of confidence and a five percent sampling error (typically noted as  $95\pm 5$ ). This means that if the survey is conducted again with the same population, you can expect the results to be within five percent of those reported 95 percent of the time... at the 50:50 split. So, if you have a yes/no question and the response is 50% yes and 50% no (the 50:50 split!), you can expect that 95 percent of the time the population surveyed would answer yes (or no) between 45 and 55% of the time.

5. How accurate will your sub-set survey results be?

In a typical American community, a random sample of adult households of sufficient size to attain confidence limits of  $95\pm 5$ , will result in about one-quarter of the respondents being parents of school-age children while about 75% will not have school-age children (“nonparents”). Hence, the survey results for both the parent and nonparent subsets will have a sampling error that is greater than five percent. For this reason, researchers often “over-sample” a subset to reduce the sampling error.

6. How long can the questionnaire be?

A better question is: *How long will it take to conduct the interview?* We believe, for example, that a telephone survey should not take longer than 8-10 minutes. The number of questions depends on the types of questions you ask and the format of the questionnaire.

7. Who will write the questions and develop the questionnaire?

BB&C writes the questions and develops the format for the questionnaire after consultation with its clients. However, every questionnaire is pretested on a population like those who will be surveyed. This means that the people to be sampled ultimately approve the final questionnaire.

To assure that respondents will not have difficulty understanding the questions or with the format of the questionnaire, make sure your questionnaire is pretested.

8. Who will conduct your telephone interviews?

If you work with BB&C, your interviews will be conducted by impartial, trained professionals. You can't get the same high-quality results by using volunteers, no matter how well you train them.

9. How will you process your data?

BB&C reviews each completed interview, codes all open-end or free-response questions, and processes the data using state of the art survey research software. In a school survey we typically provide a tabulation of each question as well as parent and nonparent subsets. At the client's option, we can also disaggregate the data on a variety of respondent variables.

10. How will your findings be reported?

BB&C provides a written report that includes an executive summary of findings, the totals and percentages for each question, and analytical data for each subset. In addition, BB&C provides a "management letter" to its primary contact in the school district.



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