When the student's perspective is combined with other evaluation information, a clear picture of instructional quality emerges.

**Student Interviews as an Evaluation Tool**

Ask an educator to describe quality education and be prepared for a discourse ranging from Dewey to Freud and back. For a direct, honest assessment of what's happening in the classrooms of your school, ask the kids.

When it comes to evaluating the effect of everything from classroom instruction to schoolwide environment, students are an indisputable source of expertise.

However, getting a student's-eye view of the educational process takes more than routine questioning. Inquiries such as “Do you like school?” or “Who is your favorite teacher?” provide little compared to the information available from well-structured and prepared student interviews.

Whether interviewing students in groups or informal one-to-one situations, a great deal of information is available if the interviewer uses open-ended questions, concise language, an unbiased tone, and truly listens. This theory has been tested through the California State Department of Education's recently developed program review process for schools receiving special state funding. Under the leadership of State Superintendent Wilson Riles, the department has developed a student-centered evaluation process that measures the "effect" of education on students through student interviews and other techniques.

**Interviewing Students**

Interviewees should be randomly selected to reflect all achievement levels, ethnic groups, and interests of the student population. Selection may be made on a formal prearranged basis or by a simple random selection within classrooms or on the school grounds.

Successful interviews are developed in the initial minutes of an interview. Students will want to know why you are asking questions or taking notes, so explain the purposes of both in simple methods at the beginning of your encounter. Give students feedback throughout the interviews by head nodding, words of thanks, and appropriate positive reinforcement. Successful interviewers explain that they are evaluating a school or program in the hope of identifying strengths as well as opportunities for improvement and are not judging individual teachers.

It is important to establish a comfortable climate for the interview by introducing yourself and using simple openers like "Do you have a minute?" or "I'd like to ask you a couple of questions." If appropriate, an interviewer may begin by mentioning something already observed: "I see you are working on long division." These techniques sound surprisingly simple, yet are frequently overlooked when adults talk to the clients of the educational process.

Elementary school students require interviewing techniques different from those used with older students, but don't underestimate either age group's ability to assess school or classroom quality.

Action-oriented questions are most effective for elementary interviewees: "What are you doing? Who told you to do it? What happens if you do it wrong? How do you know if you are right or wrong? What will you do when you are finished with this? What will you be doing later today? Secondary students may be ready to discuss their individual experiences, opinions, and feelings regarding school and can provide information on amount of time spent teaching information vs. time spent developing concepts, opportunities to apply skills, and recognition of individual student differences and needs.

How students learn can be determined by asking students about the variety of assignments and activities, the pace, grading, and the number of assignments they receive. Ask students what occurs if they fail, whether individual assistance is available, whether teacher feedback and recordkeeping are helpful.
Guidelines for Interviewing

Trainers for California's program review process offer the following guidelines for effective communication with the student as evaluator:

—Use single ideas when questioning students of any grade level. Don't cloud issues or responses by asking complex, complicated questions. Keep questions on one issue, avoiding the tension customarily caused by multi-idea and multi-issue approaches.

—Role playing provides a helpful focus when interviewing students and eliminates lengthy explanations to questions. "If I were having trouble with division of fractions in your math class, how would I get help?" "If I were a parent in your school, how would I know what my child was doing in reading?" These types of questions result in instant clarification of what actually happens in a classroom or school.

—Use neutral questions to avoid leading the student to the expected answer. Students are skilled in determining expected responses; interviewers should not reflect biases or the right answer in their questioning.

—Introductions and smooth transitions are important when talking to students. Some introductory phrases such as "I'd like you to think about" or "The next question is important to understanding your reading class" prepare the students for shifts in discussion and the direction of the interviewer.

—Constant feedback to interviewees is important to guarantee that the interviewer is not misinterpreting information while providing a picture of what has already been determined. Interviewers may share with students their initial impressions and ask for clarification or additional information should there be any holes or gaps in that perception; for example: "Let me tell you what I know so far about your reading class . . . ."

The value and truth of student interviewing as an evaluation tool for programs, curriculum, or classroom, can't be appreciated until it is successfully attempted. Readers interested in field testing the process may consider the following example from an interview between Johnny and Ms. Smith.

Ms. Smith: Hello, Johnny. I'm talking with students today to find out how you feel about our school's reading program. Just as you get a report card on your success as a student, I'm going to grade our reading program on its success in teaching students to read. What grade would you give the reading program?

Johnny: Probably an F.

Ms. Smith: You'd give the program an F.

Johnny: Yeah, because I do really badly in reading. I just don't seem to get it.

Ms. Smith: You say you don't get it. Do you know why?

Johnny: Well, there are 30 kids in there and just the teacher. It's hard to get help when I get stuck on something.

Ms. Smith: What exactly do you do when you need extra help?

Johnny: I raise my hand, but the teacher is sometimes too busy to help me.

Ms. Smith: The teacher is sometimes too busy. . . .

Johnny: Yeah, so I just forget about it and go on with my work.

Ms. Smith: I'm curious to know what happens from the time you enter the reading classroom until you leave. Exactly what do you do?

Johnny: Well, I go into the room and the first thing I do is pick up my folder. It has my assignment for the week in it. I probably will have to go to five different centers; one where you just read, one where I use this eye machine and, oh yeah, the speed reader to improve my speed and I don't know what else.

Ms. Smith: Does everyone go to the same centers?

Johnny: No. Like I don't go to the vowel center because I know my vowels, but I have to go to the speed center to help my reading speed. Then there are kids like my friend David who spends most of his time reading science fiction.

Ms. Smith: I'd like to change topics a bit and simply ask you if you think you are reading better today than when you began in the reading program.

Johnny: Oh yeah. Now I'm in the seventh grade reader and can pretty well understand it. When I started here I was in the fourth grade reader.

This interview, while appearing contrived, is actually very typical of the student-interviewer dialogue possible if good communication techniques are used. Ms. Smith has paraphrased Johnny's responses as a means of encouraging him to continue talking, has explained her purpose in talking with him, and was nonjudgmental in her responses.

Consider the following summary of information acquired from this single, brief interview:

There is only one adult or teacher in Johnny's class, so an immediate response to hand-raising is not always possible, but this does not keep Johnny from continuing with his work. Johnny's program appears to recognize individual student differences and he understands how his skills relate to his assigned work. While Johnny gives the program an F, he mentions its success in moving him from the fourth to seventh grade reader.

When Johnny's student-eye view is combined with other evaluation information and input from many other interviews, a clear picture of instructional quality will emerge. Teachers, boards of education, superintendents, and community would be hard pressed to question the validity of an evaluation package that combines hard data with the human perspective. It is a professional educator's responsibility to use the data gathered to build on successes and address needed improvements.

The student perspective is a powerful one, but teachers, administrators, or others venturing into the realm of student assessment of programs or classrooms should take note of one student characteristic: they can be brutally honest.