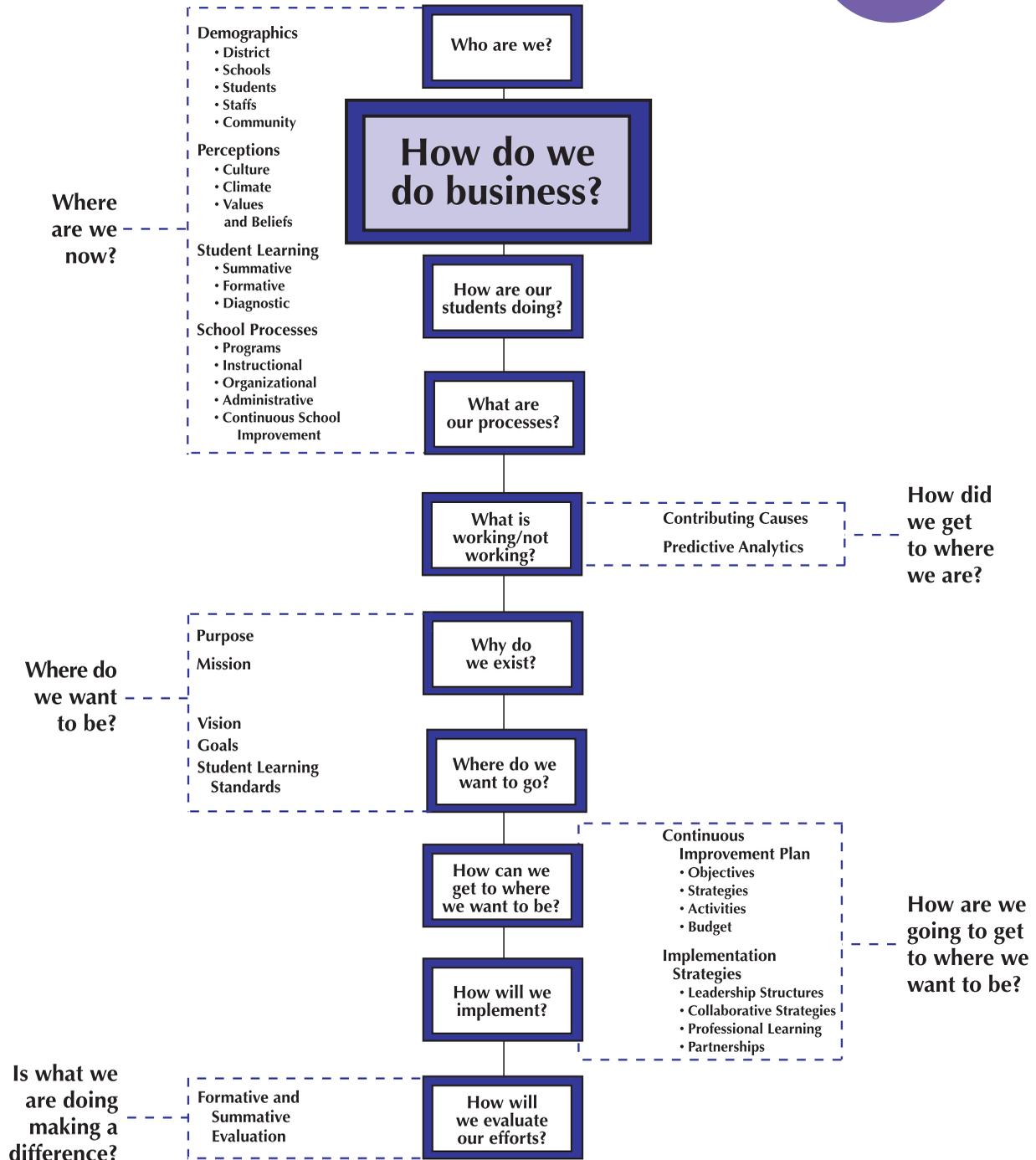


# HOW WE DO BUSINESS: PERCEPTIONS DATA



*Not to understand another person's way of thinking does not make that person confused.*

Michael Quinn Patton

*We do not act differently from what we value, believe, or perceive.*

*If we want to know what students, staff, and parents perceive about the learning environment, we need to ask them.*

*Perceptions data are important to continuous school improvement because they can tell us what students, staff, and parents are thinking about the learning organization, and answer the continuous school improvement question, "How do we do business?"*

All of us have perceptions of the way the world operates. We act upon these perceptions everyday as if they are reality. Basically, we do not act differently from what we value, believe, or perceive. If we want to know what students, staff, and parents perceive about the learning environment, we need to ask them.

The definitions of *perception* and its synonyms provide almost enough information to understand why it is important to know the perceptions of our students, teachers, administrators, parents, and members of our communities. The word perception leads us to such words as "observation" and "opinion," with definitions that include—

- ◆ a view, judgment, or appraisal formed in the mind about a particular matter
- ◆ a belief stronger than impression and less strong than positive knowledge
- ◆ a generally held view
- ◆ a formal expression of judgment or advice
- ◆ a judgment one holds as true

Synonyms include opinion, view, belief, conviction, persuasion, and sentiment.

- ◆ *Opinion* implies a conclusion thought out yet open to dispute.
- ◆ *View* suggests a subjective opinion.
- ◆ *Belief* implies often deliberate acceptance and intellectual assent.
- ◆ *Conviction* applies to a firmly and seriously held belief.
- ◆ *Persuasion* suggests a belief grounded on assurance (as by evidence) of its truth.
- ◆ *Sentiment* suggests a settled opinion reflective of one's feelings.

## PERCEPTIONS DATA: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHY THEY ARE IMPORTANT TO CONTINUOUS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Perceptions data are important to continuous school improvement because they can tell us what students, staff, and parents are thinking about the learning organization, and answer the continuous school improvement question, *How do we do business?* This question is answered through assessing the school's culture, climate, and organizational processes.

Staff values and beliefs, most often assessed through a questionnaire, tell a staff if a vision needs to be created or revisited, if team building or specific professional learning is necessary, and if there is enough cohesiveness to implement change. Perceptions can also show where the deep changes are happening in the school with respect to staff values and beliefs.

Student and parent questionnaires can add different perspectives to the information generated from staff data. Students can report what it takes for them to learn, their interests, and how they are being taught and treated. Parent perceptions can help staff know what parents need to become more involved in their child's learning.

### ASSESSING PERCEPTIONS

Common approaches to understanding perceptions in schools include the use of interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and self-assessment tools, similar to the *Education for the Future Continuous Improvement Continuums*, described in Chapter 2, and shown with the activity that describes the process for doing the assessments with staff (Appendix A). A schoolwide self-assessment, such as the *Continuous Improvement Continuums*, can provide an overview of where the staff believes the school is on the measures that make a difference for continuous school improvement. These assessments often surprise administrators who may think all staff members are thinking about school, and ultimately “doing” school, in the same way. If a planning team does not know how the school staff does business in reality, it could be creating plans and structures that might never be implemented or might not lead to the desired outcomes.

Interviews with individuals allow for in-depth understandings of topics and content. Interviews can be done in person, on the telephone, or through electronic methods like the Internet. To be able to merge interview results, specific questions should be agreed upon and used for each interview. If more than one person is conducting the interviews, standardized questions need to be created. Follow the procedures for designing good questionnaire questions.

Focus groups are small groups of representative people who are asked their opinions. Focus groups of students are often used to understand what the larger group of students is thinking or why they respond in a certain way. To understand what the student body is thinking about something in particular, one could organize groups of representative students (e.g., girls/boys, grade levels, ethnicities), randomly selected, to discuss a topic. While it might seem logical to put highly diverse people in the room, it really is not a good way to hear from all participants. You will get more information from homogeneous groupings, or groups with similar backgrounds. For example, instead of putting students from Grades 9 through 12 together, one should organize students by grade levels. This is because people tend to censor their ideas in the presence of people with different status and

*A schoolwide self-assessment, such as the Continuous Improvement Continuums, can provide an overview of where the staff believes the school is on the measures that make a difference for continuous school improvement.*

*Focus groups are small groups of representative people who are asked their opinions.*

*Questionnaires are an excellent way to assess perceptions because they can be completed anonymously and re-administered to assess the changes in perceptions over time.*

*No matter what the reason for administering a questionnaire, or interview, the steps in the process are pretty much the same—you need to start with a purpose; adopt, adapt, or create an instrument complete with questions to get to what it is you want to know.*

*To put together a valid (the “right” content), understandable questionnaire that is easy to complete and analyze, it is critical to think about and agree upon what you want to know or learn by administering the questionnaire, and how the results are going to be used.*

power. (See *Focus Group Fundamentals: A Methodology Brief*, 2004.) Multiple sessions of ten to twelve participants in a group is best. Focus groups could also benefit from the steps outlined for creating questionnaire questions.

Questionnaires are an excellent way to assess perceptions because they can be completed anonymously and re-administered to assess the changes in perceptions over time. Questionnaire results appear with the other data in the school data profile. Appendix C, *Getting to Perceptions through Questionnaires*, has five parts that will help you design, administer, analyze, present, and use questionnaire data. Visit the *Education for the Future* website (<http://eff.csuchico.edu>) for questionnaire resources, including student, staff, and parent questionnaires. For more details on questionnaire design, administration, analysis, and use, see *From Questions to Actions: Using Questionnaire Data for Continuous School Improvement* (Bernhardt, V.L. & Geise, B.J., 2009).

## OVERVIEW OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE PROCESS

No matter what the reason for administering a questionnaire, or interview, the steps in the process are pretty much the same—you need to start with a purpose; adopt, adapt, or create an instrument complete with questions to get to what it is you want to know. You also need the right people to take the questionnaire; a system to administer the questionnaire; a method for analyzing the results; and strategies for displaying, sharing, and using the results.

Figure 4.1 shows the major steps in the questionnaire process, which are described below.

### Determine the Purpose and Uses for the Questionnaire

To put together a valid (the “right” content), understandable questionnaire that is easy to complete and analyze, it is critical to think about and agree upon what you want to know or learn by administering the questionnaire, and how the results are going to be used.

**DETERMINE PURPOSE:**  
What do you want to learn? How do you want to use the results in conjunction with your school improvement plan?

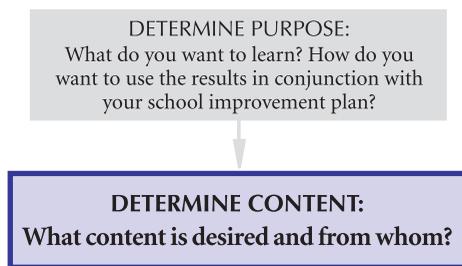


*What do you really want to know? Why are you administering a questionnaire? To what end are you asking these questions? How do you plan to use the information? How will this information be used with your school improvement plan? Who is going to do the work?* You might want to know perceptions of parents, students, teachers, and administrators with respect to a shared vision or what each constituency values and believes about school, education, teaching, and learning. These might be questions that you want to continue to ask over time to watch the responses change as new ideas and innovations are implemented. One might also want to know the degree to

which standards are being implemented in classrooms. The use of this questionnaire would be to understand what would help teachers implement the standards.

### Determine Content and From Whom You Will Gather the Information

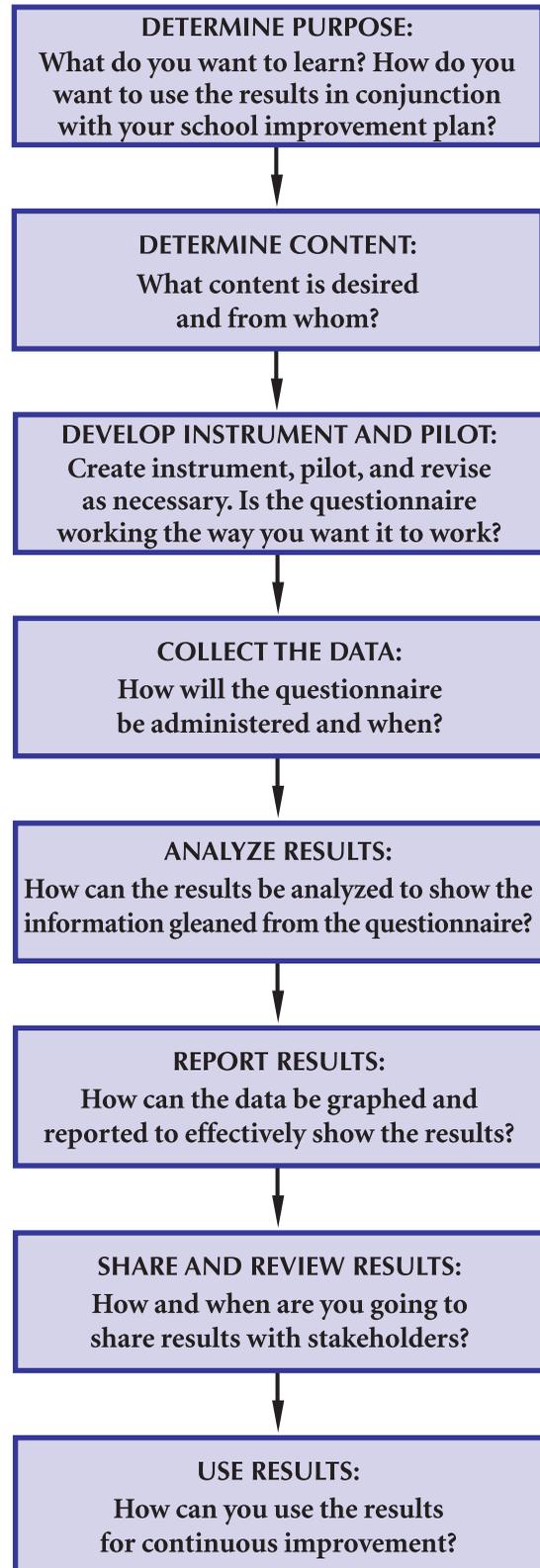
Once the questionnaire committee has been established and has agreed upon the purpose of the questionnaire and how the results will be used, the next step is to brainstorm concepts to measure and to determine who will be able to give you the most information about those concepts. You might need to do a literature search to learn more about the specific concepts you want to study. Appendix C1, *Designing Questionnaires*, will guide you through these steps.



**Identify whom you want to survey.** As you think through the purpose for administering the questionnaire, determine the logical sources of information to answer the questions. When possible, you want to go directly to the source; i.e., if you want to know what parents are thinking, you need to survey parents. (A focus group or interviews would work as well.) Consider whether the questionnaires will be given anonymously, if you will connect individual responses to data in other databases, or if you will ask for respondents’ names or identification numbers. If you want honest, non-threatened responses, you might consider not asking for names or information that could identify the respondents. This depends on the purpose and uses of the questionnaire.

**Check for existing tools.** There just might be questionnaires already created that could be used, as is, or adapted for your purposes and uses. Always start with something existing, if it meets your purpose. Creating a questionnaire from scratch is difficult and time consuming to do well.

**Figure 4.1**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE PROCESS**



*It is imperative that you pilot the questionnaire and analyze the pilot data to ensure that you are asking questions that respondents understand.*

*After you study the responses from the pilot group, revise the questionnaire to reflect what you have learned.*

## Develop the Instrument and Pilot

Creating the questionnaire can be a challenging task. Many people who want to design a questionnaire often stop when they begin formulating the questions because the job becomes too difficult. Writing the questions looks easier than it actually is. Writing good questions is labor intensive, but having good questions is the best way to get to the true perceptions of respondents.

**Pilot the questionnaire.** No matter how many times you go over an individual question, no matter how many times you look at the questions collectively, you won't know how the questions will actually be interpreted until you administer them to a sample of respondents in your target group. It is imperative that you pilot the questionnaire and analyze the pilot data to ensure that you are asking questions that respondents understand.

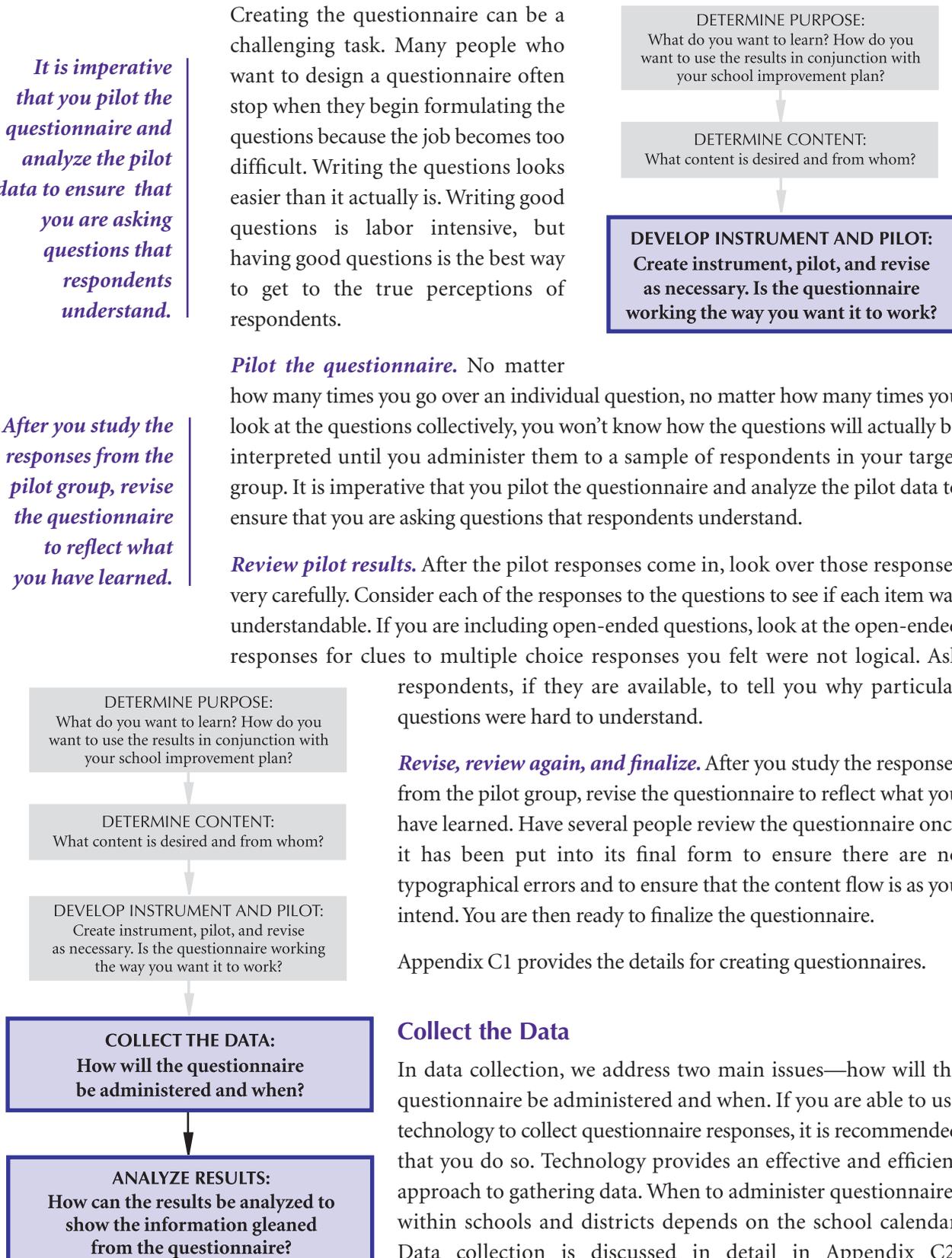
**Review pilot results.** After the pilot responses come in, look over those responses very carefully. Consider each of the responses to the questions to see if each item was understandable. If you are including open-ended questions, look at the open-ended responses for clues to multiple choice responses you felt were not logical. Ask respondents, if they are available, to tell you why particular questions were hard to understand.

**Revise, review again, and finalize.** After you study the responses from the pilot group, revise the questionnaire to reflect what you have learned. Have several people review the questionnaire once it has been put into its final form to ensure there are no typographical errors and to ensure that the content flow is as you intend. You are then ready to finalize the questionnaire.

Appendix C1 provides the details for creating questionnaires.

## Collect the Data

In data collection, we address two main issues—how will the questionnaire be administered and when. If you are able to use technology to collect questionnaire responses, it is recommended that you do so. Technology provides an effective and efficient approach to gathering data. When to administer questionnaires within schools and districts depends on the school calendar. Data collection is discussed in detail in Appendix C2, *Administering Questionnaires*.



## Analyze Results

For questionnaires to be useful to the intended audience, the analysis must allow the audience to take action on the results. How the results are displayed affects the use and usefulness of the results. Appendices C3, *Analyzing Questionnaire Results*, and C4, *Analyzing Open-Ended Responses*, describe and show effective data analysis approaches for questionnaires, and Appendix C5, *Presenting and Using Questionnaire Results*, describes and shows effective presentation approaches for questionnaires.

## Report Results

For questionnaire results to be used for improvement, it is necessary to present results effectively, in a timely fashion, and to provide avenues for the use of results. The primary goal for the entire process must be to move the analysis of perceptions data into reports that can be easily interpreted, and to get the results into the hands of the people that need them the most in time for them to use the results.

Pages of complex disaggregated results should be reduced to individual and easy to read graphs. Our goal is the immediate and easy interpretation of results. Appendix C5, *Presenting and Using Questionnaire Results*, addresses this issue, and Figure 4.2 shows the results of a disaggregated student questionnaire displayed in a way that staff like to read.

## Share and Review Results

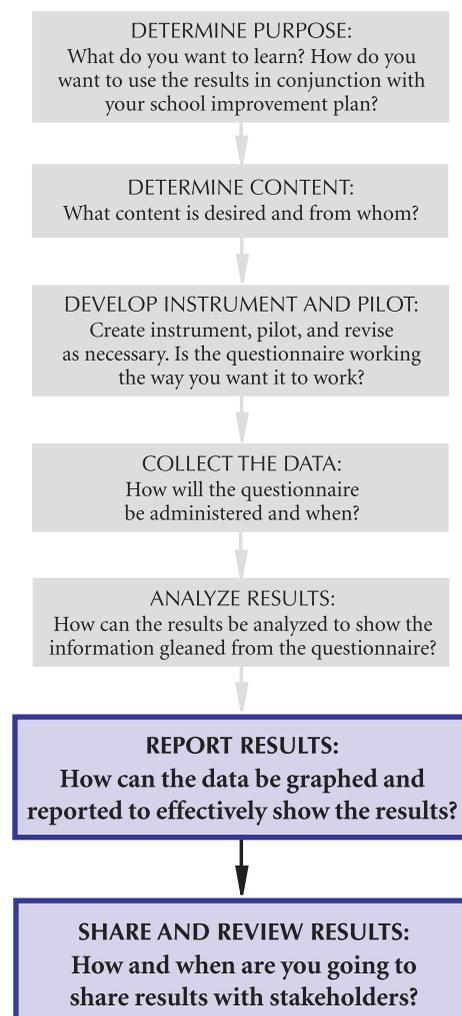
For the results to be used, the findings must be shared with and analyzed by staff and stakeholders. Different approaches to using the results with different stakeholders are described in Appendix C5, *Presenting and Using Questionnaire Results*.

*Note:* As you review questionnaire results over time, you might notice that your school is getting the same results each year. This could be an indication that staff are not using their results and that nothing is changing in the school with respect to school improvement.

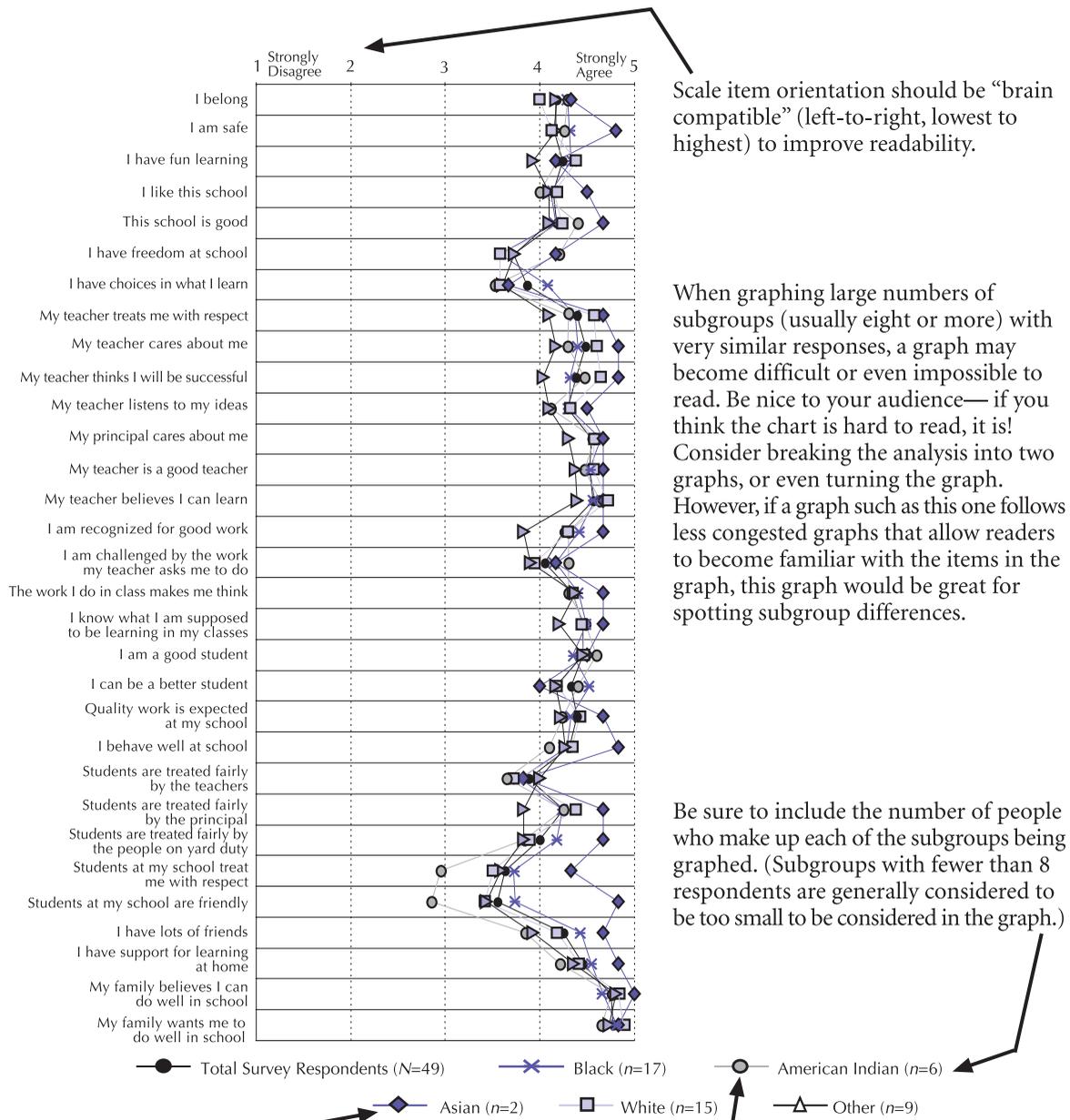
## CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Is it possible to change perceptions? Absolutely. How do we get perceptions to change? The most effective approach is through behavior changes. That means if parents, educational partners, or the school community do not believe in an approach we are taking in the

*For questionnaire results to be used for improvement, it is necessary to present results effectively, in a timely fashion, and to provide avenues for the use of results.*



**Figure 4.2**  
**EXAMPLE STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE GRAPH BY ETHNICITY**



Scale item orientation should be “brain compatible” (left-to-right, lowest to highest) to improve readability.

When graphing large numbers of subgroups (usually eight or more) with very similar responses, a graph may become difficult or even impossible to read. Be nice to your audience—if you think the chart is hard to read, it is! Consider breaking the analysis into two graphs, or even turning the graph. However, if a graph such as this one follows less congested graphs that allow readers to become familiar with the items in the graph, this graph would be great for spotting subgroup differences.

Be sure to include the number of people who make up each of the subgroups being graphed. (Subgroups with fewer than 8 respondents are generally considered to be too small to be considered in the graph.)

When representing subgroups in a series of graphs or in graphs from year to year, be consistent with color and with symbols. If Asian students in the school are blue diamonds in one graph, make sure they are presented as blue diamonds in subsequent graphs, so that comparisons can be made easily.

Use symbols that will show up either in color or when the graph is printed or copied in black and white. Each of the subgroups are represented here with different colors and different symbols.

*Note:* When disaggregating by subgroups, numbers do not always add up to the total number of respondents because some respondents do not identify themselves by the demographic, or they may have the option of indicating more than one subgroup in the demographic. Total will show all the responses. Subgroups show responses of those who identified themselves as a subgroup.

classroom, one way to change the constituency's collective minds is to increase their understanding of the approach and give them an opportunity to experience it. Awareness and experience can lead to basic shifts in opinions first, and then changes in attitudes and beliefs. Giving parents an opportunity to understand and experience a new approach helps them understand a different perspective, which could make them more supportive of new programs. Giving teachers a safe opportunity to try out new approaches will often cause their opinions of a process or program to change.

Another way to change perceptions is through cognitive dissonance. *Cognitive dissonance* is the discomfort one feels when holding two thoughts, opinions, or ideas that are inconsistent. Cognitive dissonance creates perception changes when people experience a conflict between what they believe and what they, or trusted sources, experience.

Communicating transparent information could also help in changing perceptions. Faced with an absence of reliable and transparent information, people will fill the void from disparate events and facts. This could lead to biased perceptions.

In order to change the way business is done, schools must establish guiding principles which include the mission and vision of the school. These principles grow out of the values and beliefs of the individuals who make up the school community. Sometimes school communities adopt guiding principles they want and hope to believe in, as opposed to those they do believe in. The idea is those who try out behaviors that are consistent with these principles will see a positive impact, leading to change in their internal thinking and belief in those principles. This is okay. Changed attitudes represent change at the deepest level of an organization's culture.

Too often, schools think of their guiding principles as being sacred and static. They might be sacred, but they should never be static. Even if a school keeps its guiding principles intact, their meanings evolve as people reflect and talk about them and as the principles are applied to guide decisions and actions.

*Cognitive dissonance creates perception changes when people experience a conflict between what they believe and what they, or trusted sources, experience.*

*In order to change the way business is done, schools must establish guiding principles which include the mission and vision of the school.*

### HOW MUCH TIME DOES IT TAKE TO ASSESS PERCEPTIONS WITH QUESTIONNAIRES?

**Designing your own questionnaires could take an entire year! It is best to find questionnaires that already exist to meet your needs.**

**Using the *Education for the Future* School Improvement Questionnaires, and having *Education for the Future* do your online setup, you would need to focus only on administering the questionnaires to your students, staff, and parents. Each type of questionnaire should take no more than thirty minutes for any respondent to complete.**

### HOW MUCH TIME DOES IT TAKE TO ASSESS PERCEPTIONS THROUGH INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS?

**Determining and agreeing on the questions to ask during interviews and focus groups depends upon how long the interviews or focus groups are expected to be.**

**Questions agreement might take anywhere from one hour to weeks, depending upon the stakes involved and length of time for the interviewing.**

**Interviews should be short—less than 15 minutes.**

**Focus groups might take an hour per group.**

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are perceptions data?
2. Why are perceptions data important for continuous school improvement?
3. Who knows now, and who should know, your perceptions data results?
4. Can you change perceptions? If yes, how?

### APPLICATION OPPORTUNITIES

1. Using the *Perceptions Data Inventory* in Appendix B2, list the different perceptions data being administered in your school, their purposes, and when the data are gathered. Determine what perceptions data need to be eliminated, and other perceptions data needed to be gathered.
2. Read Appendix C about designing, administering, analyzing, and presenting/using questionnaire results, and make sure the interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires you are administering are asking the appropriate questions for the purposes you want, you are getting the proper amount of participant returns, and the results are displayed in such a way that they will be used.
3. Commit to administering, analyzing, and using questionnaires, and or to interview or hold focus groups to help you and your staff understand *Where are we now with How we do business*. Visit the *Education for the Future* website (<http://eff.csuchico.edu>) for questionnaire resources, including student, staff, and parent questionnaires.