# Guide for Conducting Student Focus Groups

Why Student Focus Groups?

There are many forms of data to consider when making decisions about priorities, policies or procedures. Student focus groups offer districts and schools the opportunity to collect direct feedback from students that may be useful in improvement efforts and in fostering a positive culture where students feel valued and heard. Student feedback is a critical piece of information to gather when considering goals and priorities for a school or district. It is important to get feedback from students on postsecondary preparedness, school climate and instructional quality. This guide provides a toolkit for district and school administration to get feedback from students on how their school helps them think about pathways after graduation, if students respect each other’s differences, if students feel their school is a place where they can learn and be challenged, and the types of feedback they receive from their teachers.

Tips for Conducting Student Focus Groups

The tips below are meant to provide general guidance for conducting student focus groups.

Before the Focus Group

Planning for a focus group includes determining which students to include and who will facilitate the focus groups. I also includes determining what questions will be asked:

* Focus groups typically include 6 to 10 students.
* Focus groups should be diverse and representative-it’s important to recognize underserved populations.
* Students selected for the focus group should be comfortable voicing their honest opinions in front of their peers and a facilitator they may or may not know.
* If focus groups are conducted at the district level, it may be helpful to include students from different schools in order to gather a wide range of perspectives and so that students can react/respond to differences between schools.
* The focus group facilitator should be someone who is skilled at creating a comfortable, trusting environment in which students are willing to share their views without fearing any type of punishment.
* Focus group questions should be crafted carefully and intentionally; however, focus groups should be generally be semi-structured with room for change. It may be helpful to determine a few categories of questions and then 2-4 questions for each category.
* Questions should be targeted enough that students understand how to respond, but open enough to allow for a range of responses. It is often useful to think through possible probing questions in advance to determine more specific details you would like to gather.

Before the Focus Group  
The facilitator has a responsibility to build and maintain a rapport with each of the students in a focus group by setting a positive tone and asking effective initial and follow-up questions.

* Rapport building begins when the facilitator enters the room–his/her appearance, demeanor, facial expressions, and initial greeting can impact the facilitator/participant relationship.
* Expressing verbal appreciation for what the students are doing (i.e., the importance of the activity) and their time is an effective method for supporting student buy-in.
* Developing the facilitator/participant relationship is an ongoing process that continues throughout the entire focus group conversation through probing and feedback.
  + In some cases, it may be necessary to rephrase a particular question based on how the participant is responding. In other cases, it may be necessary to change the order of questions, returning to them later in the conversation.
* Prefaces, introductions, and transitions are helpful in maintaining clarity and ensuring a smooth focus group (e.g., “Now, I’m going to ask a few questions about [insert topic area]”; “We just talked about [insert topic area]. For the next few minutes, we are going to focus on [insert topic area]”). You can build these into the protocol in advance or just rely on the facilitator to include them.
* Facilitators should use probes to increase the depth of responses, alert the participants to the response depth the interviewer desires, and ensure that the facilitator receives all of the information he/she seeks.
* When following up after student responses, facilitators should try to use neutral statements in order to reduce bias (e.g., “Thank you for sharing that!” or “That’s interesting. I appreciate your feedback.”)
* Short, one-word follow-up questions such as “why?” can seem confrontational, so the facilitator should focus on making them softer in tone and more about his/her understanding (e.g., “Can you help me understand why?” or “Can you say a little bit more?”)
* Recording student comments allows for accurate reflection following the focus group. This can be done through audio recording or note taking. Facilitators (or accompanying note taker) should have a plan or template for recording information. The decision to audio record should be determined based on student comfort

***After the Focus Group***

When the focus group concludes, the facilitator’s work continues. Ensuring that notes are complete and comprehensive and engaged in focused reflection are both important parts of conducting focus groups.

* Facilitators should “fill in the blanks” and review notes immediately after the conclusion of the focus group.
* Engaging in both general and guided reflection can help the facilitator formulate preliminary themes and prepare for the next session.
  + General reflection: Did the facilitator find out everything he/she wanted to know? If not, what was the issue–poor wording, poor rapport, not enough time? What went well and why? What was learned from this focus group that will affect how the next focus group is executed?
  + Guided reflection: What themes were raised the most frequently? Where there any statements/discussions that were particularly interesting? How would you describe the overall tone or mood of the conversation?
* After analyzing the data, facilitators should have conversations with other school and/or district stakeholders to understand what the data mean and how the findings can support school, district, and/or state goals and priorities.

**Sample Student Focus Group Interview Protocol**

***Introduction***

1. Please tell us your first name, what grade you are in, what school you attend, and how long you have been there.

***Academic Challenge/Engagement/Expectations***

1. Do you feel like your school is a place where you can learn?
   * How do you know if you’re doing well in a class?
2. What do your teachers expect from you?
   * In what ways do your teachers communicate their expectations?
   * Do you feel challenged in your classes?
3. What types of assignments do you find most interesting or engaging?
   * Which teachers or classes offer interesting or engaging lessons or assignments?
4. Do you feel like what you are learning in school will be important for your future?
   * What would you like to do after you graduate from high school? *Probe for both college and career aspirations.*

***Adequacy of Support***

1. Do you receive feedback on your work from your teachers?
   * What types of feedback on your work do you find to be most helpful and why?
2. Do you feel like your teachers help you understand difficult concepts and challenging material?
   * How do they help you understand?
3. Do you feel like the staff at your school (e.g., principals, assistant principals, counselors, etc.) support you academically?
   * Can you give me examples of how they support you?
   * What could they be doing better to support you?
   * Do you feel like you get the individual attention you need at your school?
   * Do you feel like you have resources available to you to do your work at school or for homework?
   * Is there an adult outside of your school that you can go to if you need help with your work?

***Relationships***

1. Are there adults at this school that you feel care about you?
   * Who are they?
   * Can you give me examples of what they do to show that?
   * If you need to talk to an adult in your school about a personal problem, are there people you can trust who you can talk to?
2. Do you feel like students in your school respect each other’s differences, such as gender, race, and culture?
   * Do you feel safe at your school?

***Opportunity/Access***

1. How did you choose your classes this year?
   * Are you in all of the classes you wanted?
   * If not, what other classes did you want?
     + Why weren’t you able to schedule those classes?
     + Was the problem logistical (e.g., didn’t fit into schedule, class was full), or was the class simply not offered?
   * Were there adults who were assisting you during the course selection process?
2. Has your school tried to get you to join in extra-curricular activities, such as school clubs or organizations, musical groups, sports teams, or student government?
   * Are you able to participate in the extracurricular activities that you want to participate in at your school?
   * If not, what other activities did you want to participate in?

* Why weren’t you able to participate in these other activities?
  + Were there adults who were encouraging your participation in extracurricular activities?
  + What student leadership opportunities would you like at your school?

***Student Voice***

1. In general, do you feel like adults in your school are willing to listen to what you have to say?

***General***

1. Is there anything else that you want to tell us about your school experience?