

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS



A Guide to Authentic & Student-
Centered Data Collection For Schools

01 FOCUS GROUP OVERVIEW

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a way to collect data in which a group of participants gathers to share knowledge, voices, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about a specific topic or concept. Focus groups can help schools learn rich details of students' experiences. Facilitators moderate the small group conversation to collect data that help answer key research questions.

Unlike surveys, focus groups allow for follow-up questions in real time, and, unlike interviews, much of the information collected is based on the discussion between focus group participants as opposed to participants responding to the interviewer directly in an interview setting. For this reason, focus groups work well when respondents feel comfortable sharing honest information in a group setting.

When should I conduct a focus group?

- When you're looking for a broad but detailed range of views on a specific topic.
- When you want to capture a broad range of views on a specific topic over a short period of time.
- When you want to capture the lived experiences and lessons learned from students engaging with a program or set of practices.

When shouldn't I conduct a focus group?

- When you're looking to acquire personal information or information on sensitive topics that might make students uncomfortable to share in a group setting.
- When you want to collect information from a large number of students over a relatively short period of time.



02 RECRUITING STUDENTS

Now the fun part...Bringing students to your focus group! Successful student voice efforts begin with careful consideration of how best to reach a diverse group of young people, how they should be involved, and what support will help them make a real contribution. Authentic student voice reaches its potential only when there are adults who are willing and able to be real partners with youth. Your schools will also gain a greater understanding of youth development, improved skills in engaging youth, and a stronger motivation and commitment to working with young people.

- Gather a diverse group of six to eight students. It is best to have students from the same grade level participate in a session together, or two grade spans at most. For example, one focus group comprised of all sophomores, one of all third graders, etc.
- Selection of the focus group participants should be as random as possible. The more representative the group is of the general school population, the better feedback you will receive.
- Ensure these students represent the school as a whole (all ethnic, racial, social and cultural groups including homeless students and foster youth, abilities, and levels of academic success.)

Don't think of recruiting as a one-shot deal. Make sure students hear about your student voice efforts including focus groups throughout the year, even in the summer.

- Uses personalized invitations, postcards, letters and even welcome packets to new students.
- Invite students to a special event like a movie night or a guest speaker, and use that as a chance to tell students about your focus group.
- If a student declines at first, don't give up! Follow up with them later. Find out if there are reasons they can't participate like scheduling or transportation, and remove those barriers, especially for homeless and foster youth students.

Offer students an incentive for participating like stipend or gift card (follow your district policies), extra credit in classes, certificates for participation, swag bags with school spirit items, resources, and snacks/sweets.

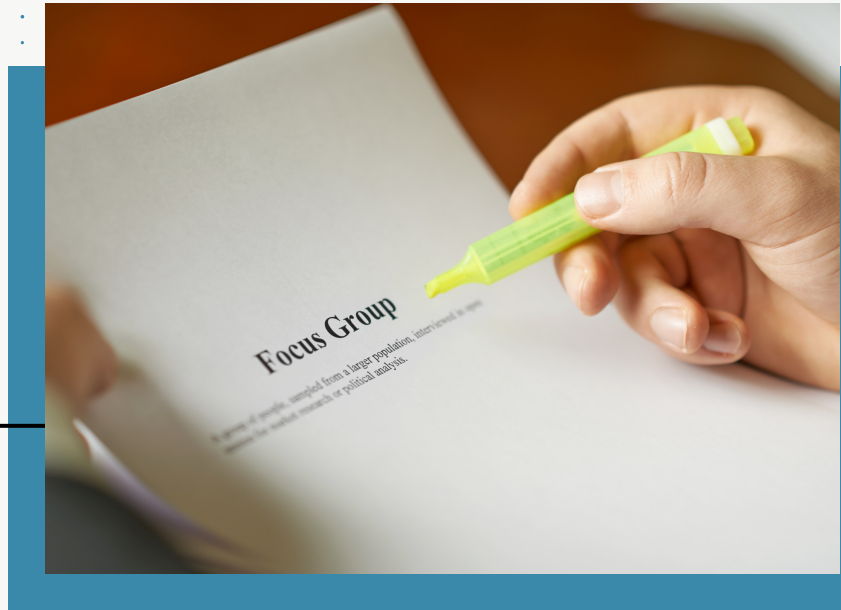
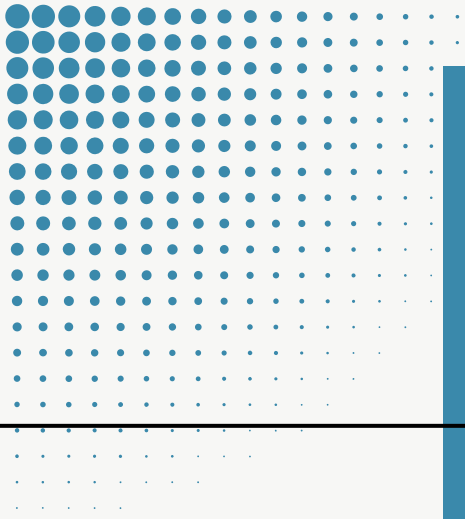


But the best recruiters are your students of course! Ask current and past focus group members how and why they joined, and repeat those ideas. When schools did this, they found that youth were more likely to attend when another youth told them about the focus group. They also found out that food (chosen by the students) was a great way to bring students in to check out focus groups for the first time.

03 SET-UP AND LOGISTICS

1. Use chart paper, sticky notes, markers, fidgets for students, paper, and pencils. If recording (ask for consent to record and let them know who will hear).
2. We suggest focus groups have no more than 5-8 students to ensure that voices within the room feel heard.
3. Consider how much time you will need. We suggest between 45-60 minutes for a small focus group after school.
4. Keep older folks in the room to a minimum. Ideally a facilitator to ask questions and moderates the discussion and a co-facilitator to observe, take notes, and support logistics, such as welcoming participants and late arrivals. More older folks than young people can dramatically throw off the dynamic.
5. Select a focus group facilitator from outside the school to conduct the focus group. Students may feel more comfortable expressing their views about school issues and their relationships with the adults on campus with a “neutral” facilitator like a principal or social worker from another school who is skillful in group discussions.
6. Ensure the setting is comfortable and nonthreatening for all students. Set up the room so that the group is sitting in a circle or around a central table.
7. Let students know when they arrive that you are excited to hear their ideas. (Also reassure
8. students that they are not in trouble!)
9. Provide youth-friendly refreshments or a meal in order to create a friendly atmosphere.
10. Keep careful track of time and keep things moving.
11. Avoid overwhelming students with too many questions and instead aim for a few in-depth conversations and exchange of ideas.
12. Create space for people to provide input in multiple ways.
13. Remember not to insert your opinions and explanations.
14. If it feels like you are having an individual conversation with each student, try to get them talking to each other and building off each other’s ideas!
15. Rephrase if students get confused or you aren’t getting the needed information
16. If you’re getting silence or short answers, reassess what isn’t working.





04

CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP SESSION

When conducting a focus group choose fewer questions (around 5) and focus on key areas of interest. Some moderators send questions to students in advance for richer, more thoughtful responses. Here is a sample script and sample questions that assess school climate, learning assess, and student voice.



Opening Statement:

Hello, my name is [facilitator name] with [name of program], and you are probably wondering why you are here today. You are here because a while back, you took a survey that asked questions about how you feel about your school, your teachers, your classmates and your learning. We looked at the survey results and want to know more about what you and your classmates were thinking when you chose your answers. Today, we are listening to you and your thoughts about your school experiences. As students of [name of school], you are the experts in what is happening in your school and can help shape your school's programs.

[Use this time to discuss your program in their school if they don't know who you are and also discuss the Survey]

During this focus group, I will ask questions and facilitate a conversation about how our school answered the [name of survey] questions. Please keep in mind that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers to any of the questions I will ask. The purpose is to have a conversation and hear the opinions of everyone in the room. I hope you will be comfortable speaking honestly and sharing your ideas with us. We hope you will feel comfortable sharing your ideas and we ask that everyone be respectful about what everyone else has to say.

I'm going to lead our discussion today. I will be asking you questions and then encouraging and moderating our discussion. We'll be here for about an hour [or other time frame].

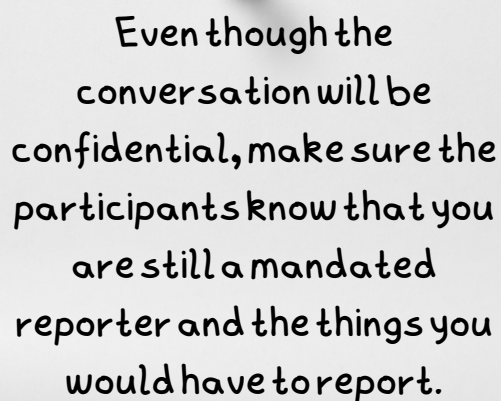
Please note that this session will be recorded (or [name] will be taking notes during the focus group) to ensure we hear all your ideas during the conversation. However, the focus group's comments will remain confidential, and your name will not be attached to any comments you make. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Warm Up:

Before we get into the conversation, let's do a quick round of introductions by sharing your first name, how long you have been at this school, and something you love to do in your free time. (A grounding activity or art exploration can also help youth transition into the space.)

Agreements (Discuss and post these agreements)

- Before we begin, I'm going to go over some important agreements to guide our conversations:
- Confidentiality is a must. Our motto is "What's said here stays here!" Please remember our motto—we want everyone to feel comfortable as this is a safe space.
- Everything that is being said here in response to the questions is going to be recorded, so we can look for trends in what you are saying and work on making improvements at our school. No names or identifying marks will be associated with your comments.
- Everyone's viewpoint is important to us. Everyone needs a chance to talk. If you have something to share, please share. You do have the right to pass. If you then want to comment on something someone else shares, please wait until they have finished and then add to the conversation.
- There are no "wrong answers," just different opinions. Say what is true for you, even if you're the only one who feels that way. Don't let the group sway you. But if you do change your mind, let me know.
- Please listen actively. Please be respectful of one another's experiences and opinions. All comments are important—we want a wide range of opinions.
- We want to hear from YOU. Please respond one at a time and give everyone the opportunity to participate.
- If any questions come up for you during this discussion please feel free to ask for clarification.
- Let me know if you need a break. The bathrooms are [location]. Feel free to enjoy a beverage and a snack.
- Are there any questions about our agreements before we get started or anything you would like to add?



Even though the conversation will be confidential, make sure the participants know that you are still a mandated reporter and the things you would have to report.





Eliciting Input:

We know your time is valuable and we appreciate it. We will keep on a schedule so we can discuss all of the important topics and we will end this focus group at [time]. Does anyone have any questions before we begin our focus group?

- Let's start by talking about your school, what are some good things about going to [name of school].
 - Think about a time that you felt proud of your school.
 - Think about the good memories you have about this school.
 - What is something that your school does well?
- What are some things you think your school needs to work on?
 - Think about a time that you didn't like something that happened at your school.
 - What are some things that the school needs to address that are going on?
- What are the best things about our classes?
 - What (else) do you like about our classes?
- Is there anything about the classes that you don't like?
 - What do you want changed about these classes?
- What makes your school either safe or unsafe?
- What would you like to see celebrated at school? How could this best be done?
- What are some social issues that you think need to be talked about in your school?
- If you were given money to create any school program to bring about change, what topic would you focus on?
 - What made you decide on that topic?
- What topics do you think would be important for our school to focus on?
 - What would you be interested in learning about?
- If you are having trouble learning, do you seek out assistance? If not, why not?
- If yes, where do you go and how do you get the help you need?
- Should there be a way that kids can regularly communicate with school leaders about the workings of school (schedules, course content, procedures)?
- What kind of learning environment would be most engaging?
 - Who would you like to lead the sessions? (without leading too much, make sure to get the idea if they would learn better from peers, adults, or a mix of both)
 - What type of activities would be engaging during the sessions?
- If you were in charge of your school, what would you do on the first day?
- What advice would you give your teachers?
- What can the adults at your school do to support you?

As the discussion begins, make sure to give students time to think before answering the questions and don't move too quickly. Use the probes to ensure that all issues are addressed, but move on when you feel you are starting to hear repetitive information. Encourage students to share stories and examples without using names (e.g., "One time I saw a student...").



Closing:

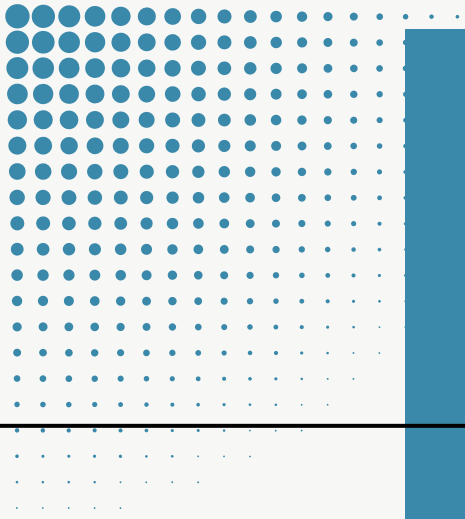
Great, everyone. It's time to wrap up. Is there anything I should have asked you today but didn't? Is there anything anyone would like to add before we leave here? Is there anything else you'd like to share?

The students should then be asked to express their feelings on the experience of being formally listened to by the adults. The facilitator should then tell students about the district's next steps in this student data collection process and how they will report back to students on progress and outcomes.

We will provide a summary of the discussion to your principal, but no names will be used in the summary. Thank you everyone for your participation! Thank you for your time and honesty, and I hope you all have a wonderful rest of the day!

Follow-up questions help you get details and expands answers. Here are some examples:

- Tell me more about that.
- Is there anything else you would like to say about that?
- Can you elaborate on that?
- Give me an example.
- What makes you think that?
- How so?
- Explain what you mean by that.
- Does anyone feel differently?
- Are there other points of view?



05

HOW TO ANALYZE & USE FOCUS GROUP DATA

- **STEP 1** As soon as possible, record and type up all responses. Clean your data by ensuring your transcripts are readable and without errors along with stripping out non-essential words.
 - **STEP 2** Revisit your discussion guide. Spend time reflecting on what questions were effective and prompted clear information and which questions or topics you should modify for future groups.
 - **STEP 3** Prepare your data for coding and analysis. When planning your analysis, identify your anticipated themes and develop a systematic way to organize the data collected during a focus group. Anticipate the process by which you will organize your data by thinking about how the information collected fits into those broad analytical themes and the ways in which the information answers your research questions. Some researchers call this developing codes. Codes are labels or categories of information that you anticipate learning about through the focus group. For example, if one of the research questions includes identifying challenges faced by facilitators during implementation, the code might be “challenge.” You can apply one or more codes to a given response or set of responses.
 - **STEP 4** Open an excel database spreadsheet and create a new sheet for each question. Go through each focus group transcript or summary and identify the information that relates to the codes. Label 2 columns on each Excel sheet, one for responses and one for coding. Enter each response on a separate line. Look for each theme and assign a number code. Assign the number code which best fits each response on the sheet
 - **STEP 5** Analyze your data by examining common themes associated with the codes. Use the Excel ‘Sort’ function to group entries by the categories you have assigned to them. Arrange categories from those with the largest number of entries to those with the smallest As you examine specific codes, look for examples that illustrate what you see in the data and identify any deviations from patterns you notice. As you analyze your data, determine whether you have to adjust your discussion guide, approach to collecting data, or research questions.
 - **STEP 6** Synthesize your findings. Use your coded data to answer your research questions by describing variations in responses to each question and overarching patterns across your focus groups. For example, by analyzing all the information associated with “challenges,” you can begin to combine and interpret that data by organizing it into categories of challenges.
 - **STEP 7** Use and share your findings in a way that suits your audience. You can use graphics, tables, or text to communicate your findings and conclusions. Illustrate with powerful quotes.
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Next Steps

Once all the focus groups have been completed, and you have the results from each session, then it is necessary to look at all the focus group discussions together and begin to describe the problem and possible solutions. Review the notes from the discussion and see if there are key themes that emerged. For example, a theme might be that students feel their peers are very helpful or that students do not know how to share their ideas in class. Do not forget that if you are using other data sources (School Climate Survey, Local/Community data) as you will most often, it is useful to align the information gathered from the focus group with the information in these sources.

- When reviewing focus group responses, look for trends. What was repeatedly said by multiple students? It is important to realize that one loud passionate student does not represent the views of all the students. While this student's ideas should not be dismissed, these ideas alone are not a theme.
 - Once the themes are identified, they should be shared with students and teachers. Action plans should then be developed to address areas in need of change and celebrate and maintain identified strengths. This process should be viewed as dynamic and ongoing. Never stop seeking student input, ideas, and opinions.
 - When analyzing the results of focus groups, look for patterns in the conversations. What themes emerged, both positive and negative? What particular perspectives were evident? Did the 11th graders in your school have a different point of view on an issue than 9th graders?
 - Do not report the results of focus groups by percentage (e.g., 75% of the students we talked to said that most bullying happened in the locker room). Instead, report that "a common theme among students regarding bullying was that it typically took place in the locker room. Several students mentioned that they had witnessed incidents after gym class that they considered bullying."
 - When the particular way a student has said something captures or highlights a theme, include the exact statement in the report (e.g., One student said, "I saw some older students kick a younger kid and no one did anything to stop it.")
 - Be sure to report what you, as an interviewer, learned. What insights did the conversations provide for you? What previous judgments were confirmed or called into question? Also include follow-up questions you believe should be discussed further. Share your findings with the appropriate audience.
 - Use the information gathered during focus groups to inform your next steps and create an action plan focused on improving areas of weakness, as well as celebrating and maintaining identified strengths at your school. This process should be viewed as dynamic and ongoing. Never stop seeking student input, ideas, and opinions.
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Focus Group Summary

The facilitator (with or without assistance from the notetaker) should complete the Focus Group Summary within 48 hours of the focus group meeting.

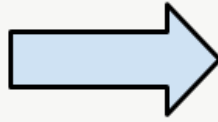
Guidance: Review the notes from the discussion and see if there are key themes that emerged. Identify these themes and provide feedback heard from students in the space below. *Remember, do not use the names of focus group participants.*

Focus Group Date:

Key Themes	Details	Additional Notes

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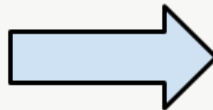
**STEP 1:
CONSIDER
THE SITUATION**



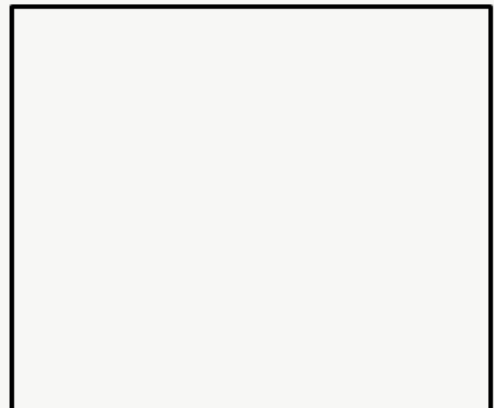
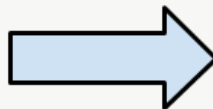
**STEP 2:
CONSIDER
THE SOLUTIONS**



**STEP 3:
USE YOUR VOICE**



**STEP 4:
FOLLOW UP
FOR FIDELITY**



Sources

Quaglia Student Voice Focus Groups (Grades 3-12)
<https://www.quagliainstitute.org/uploads/originals/quaglia-focus-groups-3-12.pdf>

Quaglia Student Voice
<https://www.quagliainstitute.org/library/focus-groups>

Including Youth Voice in Education Partnering with Youth to Conduct Research
https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_PA_Including_Youth_Voice_in_Education_Partnering_With_Youth_to_Conduct_Research.pdf

Youth Focus Group Facilitation Toolkit
<https://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Youth-Focus-Group-Facilitation-Protocol.pdf>

Inclusion 2020 Focus Group Toolkit
<https://www.youthsporttrust.org/media/j1xf0qap/yst-inclusion-2020-youth-voice-toolkitfinal.pdf>

Focus Group Protocol for Youth in Franklin County
<https://cdfohio.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/06/Focus-Group-Protocol-6.25.2020.pdf>

Students Speak Are We Listening? A Focus Group Toolkit
https://www.ccsse.org/docs/SSBTN_FG_Handouts.pdf

Creative Ways to Solicit Youth Input
http://www.summermatters.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Creative_Ways_to_Solicit_Youth_Input.pdf

New York State Department of Education School Focus Groups Guide
<http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/accountability/school-focus-groups-guidebook.pdf>