



Conducting Focus Groups to Develop a Comprehensive School Portrait

WHAT ARE FOCUS GROUPS?

Focus groups are an effective means of collecting qualitative information that can be used to guide improvement planning and efforts. A focus group is usually conducted with 8-10 participants who are connected with the school and have information about what is happening there. Guided by a moderator, these individuals discuss selected topics or answer open-ended questions. Discussions and/or answers are recorded during the session and later analyzed for common themes. The process can lead to rich conversation and meaningful insights into issues. Focus groups allow Building Leadership Teams (BLTs) to explore and understand attitudes, opinions, feelings and behaviors of staff, family, community members and students as they address general or specific issues related to the school community. The result is clearer identification of both strengths and needs. The technique can also assist BLTs as they compile their school profile by providing a better understanding of quantitative finding such as test and survey results.

FOCUS GROUPS

- go beyond typical surveys in providing rich, insightful data
- provide for participant interaction that draws out varying perspectives
- allow for expanded discussion around specific issues
- result in quick turnaround from implementation to findings

HOW DO FOCUS GROUPS WORK?

Developing the Research Objectives and Questions/Topics

Building Leadership Teams can use focus groups to find out almost anything about the climate, day-to-day operations, and individual perceptions of the school. To obtain these outcomes, it is important for BLTs to identify what is currently known about the school and specific areas where additional information may be beneficial. This information will be used to develop the research objectives. The BLT will then need to formulate a set of questions or topic statements that will guide the discussion.

The questions or topics may be broad to elicit opinions or attitudes about the general status of the school. Examples of broad prompts might look like:

Tell me about this school. What kinds of students go to this school? How do students learn at this school? Who makes the decisions in this school?

Specific questions or topics may be aimed at gathering information about discrete subjects. Such questions might be:

How effective is the in-school suspension program for students with ongoing behavior challenges?
Do parents understand how growth toward the district content standards is assessed?
What can adults do to help students stay in school?
How effective has the reading program been for students with specific reading disabilities?

Selecting a Moderator

Once created, these questions or discussion topic statements will be used by the moderator who will conduct the focus group sessions. The role of the moderator is very important to the success of getting the information the BLT desires. Therefore, careful consideration must go into choosing a moderator. The individual selected will need to be unbiased toward the outcome of group findings and have no personal agenda around the topic being researched that might skew the interviewing and analysis process.

Greenbaum (1998) and Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996) have cited the following characteristics as desirable in a moderator, whether an outside person or someone within the school community is sought for the role.

- effective interviewing skills
- does not project an attitude of expertise of topic
- Superior listening skills
- excellent short term auditory memory
- well organized
- quick learner
- high energy level
- appropriate social skills

The moderator will work with the BLT to determine the focus group participants and the logistics (dates, times and location). It is important that each group be asked the same set of questions or topics for discussion so that responses can be compared.

Selecting Group Participants

It is recommended that at least two focus groups of representatives from a particular segment of the school should be conducted to help validate the accuracy of findings. The participants in each focus group should have a shared trait or experience on which the discussion can build. This might include students who are at certain grade levels, educators who have been enforcing school policy, families of students attending the school, etc. It will be important when assigning or recruiting participants to ensure a representative sample from the school.

Identifying the most appropriate participants may not always be easy. As just suggested, the group should probably be somewhat homogeneous as to their common role in the school community. If a group is too heterogeneous (e.g., teachers, administrators and parents in the same group), the impact on individual contributions may be considerable. Conversely, if the group is 'loaded' with participants known to share a common opinion, diverse perspectives will not be revealed. A selection procedure that is at least somewhat of a random sampling of the target group is recommended.

The number of participants in a focus group may vary. The optimum number is probably between 6 and 10, however, some researchers conduct sessions with up to 15 participants.

HOW DO WE CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

Planning for the Session

The quality of output from the focus groups will be largely dependent upon advanced planning. Addressed should be such things as the recruitment of the appropriate participants, the preparation of a ‘discussion guide,’ and the determination of how the information will be recorded.

The moderator’s guide should outline some basic components of the session, such as:

- Introduction (welcome, purpose, session procedures)
- Terms to be clarified
- Key questions and possible follow-up probes
- Member check (determine/clarify how each member perceives the issues)
- Closing statements (identify major theme/s from the responses, request anonymity of the information, express thanks, etc.)

Focus groups may last anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours. Regardless of the length of the session, it is important that the moderator ensures careful tracking of the time (perhaps planning for a certain number of minutes per question) and detailed recording of the discussion or further analysis.

The moderator may plan to take notes on member responses, both verbal and nonverbal, as well as noting key issues that may emerge during the session. However, if the focus group session is not tape recorded, it is important to arrange for at least two other individuals to record responses in order to increase the accuracy of the information. (See the *Focus Group Reporting Form* provided on the last page.)

Things to SAY before you BEGIN:

The purpose of this focus group is to gather information that will help us understand _____.

This focus group will last for _____.

Whatever you say here will remain confidential. That means that we won't reveal what was said here by individual name, although we will share the information that you give in general. It also means that all of you agree not to share the comments made here with others outside this group. It is extremely important that we all understand the nature of this confidentiality since it will help us to get as clear and honest a picture of your school as possible.

We will tape this focus group and transcribe the tape. Where needed, fictional names will be substituted for the names mentioned here.

Since each of your perspectives is important, we need to make sure that everyone gets a chance to express their opinions and no one takes too much of the air time. I will take responsibility for time keeping and making sure that we address all of the questions. Use your best strategies to express your opinions without making others feel uncomfortable.

Things to SAY at the END:

Thank you for your participation, your input will be invaluable. Remember that what has been shared here is to be kept confidential.

Questioning Strategies

The moderator should ask participants **general questions** when starting a discussion around a certain topic then move to questions that will further **detail** or **expand** the answers of the participants to elicit responses that are more comprehensive. These general questions would include basic who, where, when, why and how questions. The moderator can encourage participants to provide further insight into the issue by asking **elaboration** or **clarification questions**. These probes can be used to make sure that there is complete understanding about what the participant said. The following is an example of how this process might play out.

When discussing the area of school safety, the moderator might ask a group of middle school students:

General Question	Detail Probes or Expanders	Clarification or Elaboration
Do students feel safe at this school?	What do teachers do to make you feel safe? Tell me how that makes you feel safer? Are there areas in the school you feel safer?	What does that look like? Tell me a little more about how they do that. You said the way that your classrooms are set up made you feel safer. Could you explain what that looks like?



HOW DO WE ANALYZE THE INFORMATION?

There are several ways in which the data gained from the focus group can be analyzed for use by the BLT. Because the data collected is qualitative in nature, moderator/recorder notes and impressions, as well as tape transcription for additional analysis are vital to the process.

Transcription will depend upon available resources. Secretarial staff, BLT member(s) who have primary responsibility for evaluation, or other designated persons who will carry out the research may transcribe the tapes. The following steps are useful in analyzing responses:

Describe the Participants

In order for the individual doing analysis and others who may use data results to better understand the information; it will be important for the moderator to provide a profile of those who participated in the group. How the individuals are connected to the school (students, families, community members, etc.) and simple demographic information such as grade level, gender, language abilities, etc. can provide functional descriptions.

Summarize Key Ideas

It is useful for the moderator to summarize key ideas immediately after the focus groups, both to frame the experience and to determine the initial, central categories for data analysis.

When writing these notes, the moderator should consider:

- Big ideas that seemed to emerge
- Words that were used and their meaning
- Context in which comments were made
- Consistency or patterns of responses

Write Impressions of Transcriptions/Notes

The next step in analysis is to review the transcriptions of the group discussion. When reading the transcripts or notes from the group, it is useful for the individual doing analysis to write interpretive thoughts about the discussion in the margins of the notes. This step can reveal how group dynamics affected participants interactions and responses as well how the discussion unfolded, elements that may not be captured when just coding the data.

Describe Each Category

Based upon the big ideas identified, the moderator and/or individual doing the analysis will need to define what the central ideas, or categories, mean. This step helps to clarify the process of analyzing and sorting statements in the discussion notes into the most appropriate categories.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLE

One of the categories the moderator identified from a focus group was after-school activities. The description assigned to this category was as follows: **After-School Activities** includes any activities that happen at the end of the student's school day (2:45 p.m. or later).

Code the Data

After the tapes have been transcribed or notes reviewed, the text of the discussion will need to be broken down into text segments that support the big ideas identified by the moderator or individual analyzing the data. These text segments, which can be phrases, sentences, or paragraphs, should

support the specific categories and should include direct quotes from participants. Some individuals carry out this step using big chart paper. The top of the paper is labeled with the big idea or category and then text segments from the transcript are pasted under the most appropriate category. Others prefer to take the transcript and perform a cut and paste procedure on the computer. Those who are experienced in qualitative data analysis may also choose to use computer programs that are designed to aid in the sorting process.

THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

After School Activities

"It's really hard to stay after school for help or to do sports because there are no buses that go to my neighborhood."

"Mrs. _____ helps me with my homework when I get behind. I can usually find her in her office after school."

"My mom can't get me after school. If I don't go home on the school bus, I'm in trouble."

"I like being able to be on a sports team. I am on the volleyball team. We practice every afternoon after school and have games at least once a week"

"I would like to be on the team but I don't have anyone to pick me up after practice."

"Sometimes I stay after to get caught up in Math. Mr. _____ calls it resource time"

Refine Categories

Sometimes the individual doing the analysis will be able to refine or add to the categories when there seems to be sufficient text segments to support another major idea. The previous example could be further refined as follows:

After School Activities-Transportation

"It's really hard to stay after school for help or to do sports because there are no buses that go to my neighborhood."

"My mom can't get me after school. If I don't go home on the school bus, I'm in trouble."

"I would like to be on the team but I don't have anyone to pick me up after practice."

Identify Themes and Possible Theories

This is the Final step in analysis and requires that the interpreter determine if the statements or text segments, in fact, confirm the categories or central ideas, in addition, the interpreter will need to develop a hypothesis as to what the statements are saying about the category.

Consider the Previous Example

The interpreter, together with the BLT members, looked over the sorted categories and agreed that the statements support the category. They formed the following hypothesis about the category and supporting statements:

The lack of after-school transportation is a barrier to allowing students to access after-school assistance from teachers as well as sports and social activities.

USING THE INFORMATION

The BLT can now use this information to help develop further evaluation of access to after-school activities. The team may choose to collect more in-depth information to substantiate their hypothesis. In the previous example, the BLT decided to survey students and families about the transportation needs in relation to accessing after-school events. Once this survey is completed, the BLT will use the responses to determine specific actions to address this issue.

The following is a sample of the focus group data that one high school collected.

The numbers of students having problems with attendance had increased significantly over the past 3 years at the school. BLT decided to find out why students were not attending and what could be done to help the problem.

The BLT and outside moderator developed the following discussion guide:

1.) What are some of the reasons students don't come to school?

Probe

- what things may be unwelcoming
- issues that make it uncomfortable
- issues for freshman
- school preparation
- friend influence
- consequences at home
- places students go
- changes in attendance since starting at Westward

2.) What could be done that would help students choose to come to classes?

Probe

- Is this a welcoming place?
- If not, why and what could be done?
- What would increase comfort?
- Do students consider the climate respectful between teachers, students and peers?

3.) What advice would you give to Westward staff about how to make the transition from middle school to high school more successful for students?

Probe

- Would it help to have older students that you could talk to or go to for assistance?
- Would it be useful if you were assigned one teacher as your mentor at the beginning of the year?

Three focus groups, lasting one hour each, were completed. Each focus group had 6-8 participants. There were 14 males and 7 females. All students in the first focus group were freshmen. The other groups were comprised of sophomores, juniors and seniors. Participants were selected based upon attendance records. Those who had had problems and those currently having attendance issues were identified and recruited.

The following is a selection from the final report constructed by the moderate and BLT.

WESTWARD HIGH SCHOOL March, 1999

What Students Say About Their Attendance Issues

The Building Leadership Team has compiled this report. These data represent findings from student focus groups that were representative of freshmen and upperclassmen with current or previous attendance issues.

Students shared a variety of reasons why they or others didn't attend school or "ditched" certain classes during the day. Some cited personal reasons that were under their control:

"(students ditch school...) Because they are tired. Sometimes I am too tired to get to go school so I just lay down. Or because I don't like the teachers. Because they don't get enough help." (9th)

"Cause if you like lets go out to eat. You can't say no cause its better than going to school and doing your work. You might as well go." (9th)

"Laziness, just not wanting to go really"

"They forgot to do their homework and they use it as a scapegoat and they just leave. They just don't go"

"It depends on the class, too, because sometimes the class is just boring so you won't go. If you don't feel (like getting up and want to be) sleeping or whatever. You feel like you have something better to do with your time."

A few students indicated that friends are very important to them. In fact, friends sometimes strongly influence how they will spend their day.

"They come to school to see their friends and get their friends and leave".

"If your friends aren't going to class, you don't want to be left out so you are going to leave with them and not go to class"

A number of students talked about the difficulties presented by transition from middle school to high school. Such factors as the climate of the high school and student interactions were cited as influencing a student's desire or willingness to attend.

"I know like freshmen coming up, seniors make it really hard for them, because lots of times they'll just rag on them the whole time. It doesn't mean you have to have a class with them, it just means walking down the halls and stuff. Freshmen get made fun of a lot.

"People get picked on a lot, too. Like I think people hear a lot of rumors like when they're down at (the middle school) that there's all kinds of fights and stuff up here and they are afraid to be here. And like if the least little, the littlest thing happens like someone says something to them they get scared and they don't want to be here.

"You need to start off good out there or you are not going to do good. (didn't start off good at all my first trimester was like—I think starting the first or second week

I just started ditching every now and then it was like, well, this isn't a problem, I'll be okay, I'll just ditch a couple of more times. Then it's like "Oh well, I'm not doing good in this class anyway I'm not going to go anymore."

Some of the freshmen noted how different the structure was at the high school level versus the middle school. The increased freedom experienced in high school was cited by some as potentially problematic and often used as a rationale for leaving campus during the school day.

"Well, no. Just like more supervision. Just like the younger kids, cause that's what they want to do when they just come out of middle school They are going to do it, no matter what. I guarantee that they are going to do that for at least one semester. They are going to do it just because it's just different from middle school. That's what I did." (9th)

"If they make tighter rules, it will end up keeping more kids out because (they will continue messing up and they will) kick us out. Kids are going to do it anyway. They are just going to get into more trouble than they did." (9th) "Earlier, we were talking about like more freedom for the kids. I understand more freedoms not as much as they were saying. I say that we have some freedoms and then some things we get more strict on cause every kid is going to want their freedom and then as soon as they have their freedom they are going to be let's do more. (9th)

Based upon the report, the BLT developed a school improvement goal of increasing attendance. The activities selected to achieve that goal included:

1. Provide a teacher mentor for each student. The mentor would personally call and invite the student to orientation night, provide him/her with a tour of the building, call and talk with family members of the student to check in at least one time per month, and track grades and attendance issues to flag the need for support.
2. Develop a course that all freshmen are required to take that would focus on ways to negotiate high school. Content of the course would include lessons on personal organization, study skills and connecting with other students and faculty.

Every Member of the building leadership team had a positive response to the focus group process and to the use of the information in tailoring the school improvement plans so that they would more directly address the identified issues.

REFERENCES

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Focus Group Reporting Form

Date of Focus Group	
Location of Focus Group	
Number and Description of Participants	
Facilitator Name	
Assistant: (if applicable)	

Questions 1:

Brief Summary/Key Points	Notable Quotes

Question 2:

Brief Summary/Key Points	Notable Quotes