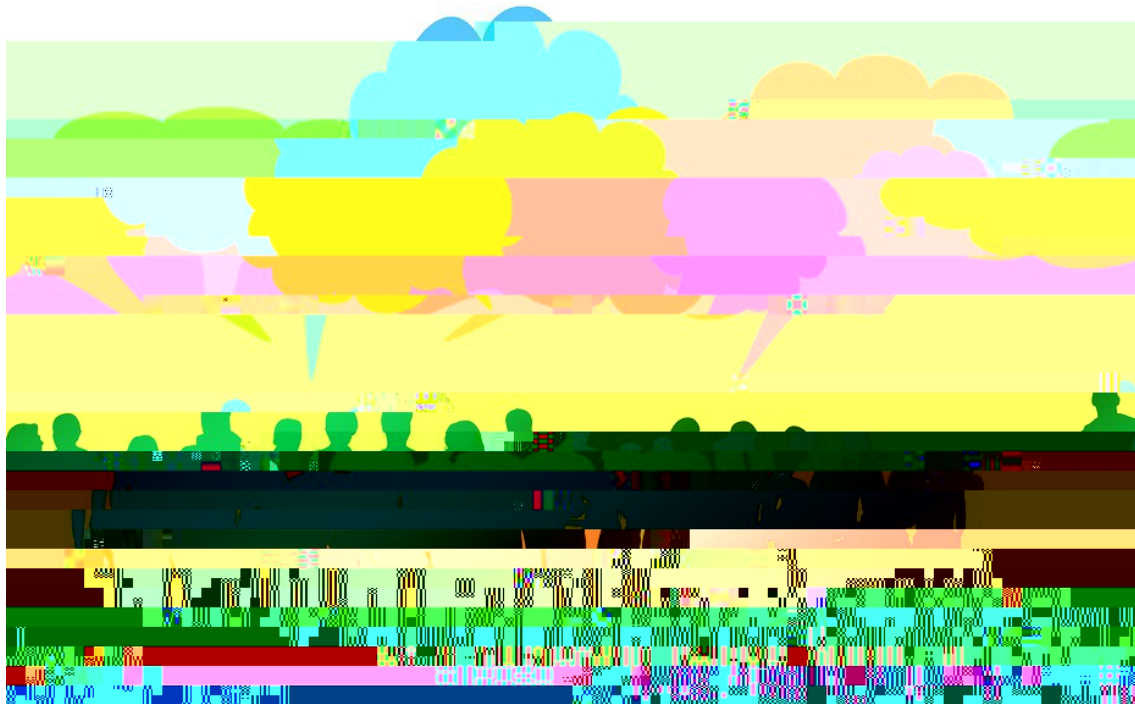




# School Focus Groups Guide



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All Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools will be required to implement one CSI Engagement Option annually. One of the options available for schools is to conduct Focus Groups with students and parents.

### **Requirements**

Schools selecting this option must abide by the following parameters:

- Schools shall host one focus group of students once every two months.
- Schools shall host one focus group of parents in the alternating months, so that the school hosts a focus group once a month.
- Each focus group should last approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
- The focus groups shall be led by a school-supplied facilitator and include a school-supplied note taker.
- The size of the focus group should range between 4 and 12 individuals.
- The students and parents selected shall be representative of the school's population and include individuals that have not been involved with existing school-based decision-making entities, such as the School Leadership Team or student government.

Focus groups are ideal for gaining a deeper understanding of the perceptions of students and parents.

## Selecting a Facilitator

Selecting a facilitator is one of the most important aspects of hosting a focus group.

The individual should be someone familiar with the school that the school community trusts.

This person will be responsible for:

- Selecting participants (students and parents)
- Developing topics for each meeting
- Leading the focus groups
- Communicating findings to school leader

| <b>Skills of a Great Facilitator</b> |                                |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Maintains neutrality                 | Ensures supportive environment |
| Fosters participation                | Focuses on efficiency          |
| Creates sense of purpose             | Keeps group on track           |

## Focus Group Membership

The focus groups are intended to provide opportunities to learn more about the perceptions of students and parents. With that in mind, it is important for the school to identify individuals for focus groups that are reflective of the school population and able to provide insights that the school can benefit from hearing.

In addition, schools should select individuals that have not been involved in decision-making entities, such as a school leadership team. This can be a great opportunity to expand outreach and engagement with individuals that have not been involved in the past.

Schools have two options for how they would like to organize focus group membership throughout the year:

**Option 1:** Schools can keep the membership the same for each focus group. This would allow the school to gauge perceptions over time, since the participants would not change.

OR

**Option 2:** Schools can change the membership of the focus group for each session. This would allow the school to broaden engagement opportunities for students and parents.

### **Focus Group Facilitator Tips**

Facilitators are encouraged to use the following strategies to assist them with managing the focus group:

1. Make clear at the very beginning that you will not share with school leadership the names of individuals that shared any specific statements and that there will be no consequences for sharing opinions.
2. Introduce the note taker and explain how the note taker is not interested in names, but instead is looking for trends among the responses.
3. Make clear at the beginning that the school5her i

## Conducting the Focus Group

There are five steps to facilitating a focus group. Each focus group should last approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

- **Welcome Participants**
- **Open the Session**
  - Introduce facilitators
  - Establish ground rules/norms
  - Allow time for participants to ask questions
- **Facilitate**
  - Ask the group questions to understand their perceptions
- **Close the Session**
  - Summarize the main points
  - Explain confidentiality
- **Thank Participants**

## Focus Group Questions

Schools should use the focus groups as an opportunity to learn the perceptions of students and staff. Focus groups can be an excellent way of learning if new initiatives are being perceived and embraced as the school intended.

- The facilitator should work with the school principal to develop specific questions for each focus group.
- These questions can be the same at each session, to gauge if improvement has occurred, or the school may opt to create new questions for each session.
- The questions asked of students may be very different than questions asked of parents.
- The facilitator must make sure the questions are easy to follow and free of jargon.
- The facilitator should be careful not to provide leading questions. For example, the question “Do you ever feel bored in class?” is likely to generate many students sharing that they have felt bored in class, but unlikely to provide feedback that could be helpful for the school. Instead, the facilitator could consider asking the question as “Do you feel like you have too much work in your class, not enough work in your class, or just the right amount?”
- Questions that start with “How” are likely to result in responses that describe actions, but provide little insight into parents’ or students’

opinions about the topic. Be wary of using questions that start with “How” often.

- The questions asked should be ones that will generate answers that are opinions.

## Sample Focus Group Note Taker Form

| <b>Focus Group Note Taker Form</b> |                 |                     |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Date: _____ Note taker: _____      |                 |                     |
| <b>Question</b>                    | <b>Response</b> | <b>Observations</b> |
|                                    |                 |                     |





(Time is  
dependent on  
schedule/  
approximately

## Focus Group Summary

The facilitator (with or without assistance from the notetaker) should complete the Focus Group Summary and give it to the principal 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 or parents in the space below. Remember, do not use the names of focus group participants.

Focus Group Date:

Stakeholder Group:

| <b><u>Key Themes</u></b> | <b><u>Details</u></b> | <b><u>Additional Notes</u></b> |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1)                       |                       |                                |
| 2)                       |                       |                                |

|           |  |  |
|-----------|--|--|
| <b>3)</b> |  |  |
| <b>4)</b> |  |  |
| <b>5)</b> |  |  |

## Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

### ***1. Does the facilitator need to be trained?***

To effectively run a Focus Group the facilitator should be knowledgeable about Focus Groups. The guidebook has been prepared to walk staff through the designing and facilitating of effective Focus Groups.

### ***2. Can administrators serve as a facilitator or note taker?***

To ensure that students and parents are comfortable speaking candidly, administrators should **not** serve as facilitators or note takers. Non-administrative staff, including those in a school leadership program internship, should fill these roles instead.

### ***3. Can parents serve as facilitators or note takers?***

No. This should be led by a member of school staff.

### ***4. Would staff be compensated for work outside of their contractual hours?***

The school can use its school improvement funds to compensate an assigned staff for work done on this project outside of their normal contractual hours, provided this practice is consistent with its local collective bargaining agreement.

### ***5. How are participants chosen for the Focus Groups?***

The school leader should select individuals that will share perspectives that the school can benefit from hearing. The school should do its best to ensure that the group is reflective of the school, and the school should also include individuals that have not previously been part of decision making at the school. Please refer to "Focus Group Membership" for more information.

### ***6. If someone wants to be on the focus group but that person has previously been involved with decision making, can he or she attend the focus group?***

Yes. Those that have been involved in decision making are not forbidden from attending; however, the group must contain some individuals that have not been involved with school decision making in the past.

### ***7. What if there are too many/too few people who want to be a part of the Focus Groups?***

The school should do its best to ensure that those identified can attend the discussion. In order to ensure a quality discussion that allows ample opportunity for sharing, the focus group should have between four and twelve members. F

### ***8. What if one participant is dominating the conversation?***

It is the responsibility of the facilitator(s) to establish group norms and maintain balanced conversation among participants. If it is observed that one participant is dominating the conversation, the facilitator and other participants are encouraged uphold the values of the Focus Group by reminding them that all stakeholder opinions are necessary.

### ***9. What topics and questions should be covered?***

Focus Group discussions should be about issues or ideas that schools are interested in learning more about the perceptions of stakeholders.

### ***10. What happens after each focus group?***

The facilitator will review the notes and provide a summary of key themes to the principal. The principal

consistent lately. The principal should share with stakeholders any actions that the principal made in response to focus group feedback as a way of encouraging future dialogue and messaging that stakeholders' perceptions are important.