

Interviewing Students in Advance of Developing the SCEP

BACKGROUND

Since March 2020, schools across the country have experienced unprecedented disruptions to their typical model of learning. In Spring 2021, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) introduced Student Interviews as means of better understanding the student experience and made Student Interviews a foundational activity that team members from any school identified for additional support and improvement would need to complete prior to writing their upcoming School Comprehensive Educational Plan (SCEP).

To make sure that the student experience is at the center of the SCEP, schools identified for additional support will again interview students as part of the 2022-23 SCEP Development process.

Objective

- To develop empathy and a better understanding of student experiences so that the SCEP Development Team can develop a plan that takes into account the hopes and needs of the students.

How the Interviews Fit into the SCEP Development Process

- Student interviews occur after the SCEP Development Team has been formed and before the SCEP Development Team has identified the school's Commitments for 2022-23.
- Teams should identify Commitments for the 2022-23 school year that are connected to the feedback students provided during the interview process.
- Teams are encouraged to reconnect with the students as the plan is written to ensure that the plan is reflective of the responses students provided.

SCEP STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Minimum Requirements

SCEP Development Teams have flexibility in how the student interviews are arranged, provided the following minimum expectations are followed:

1. Between 10 and 25 students are interviewed.
2. The students interviewed are representative of the student body. The students selected should include those who have a range of academic and behavioral (e.g. attendance, discipline) successes and struggles.
3. Not all students are interviewed together; interviews may occur in small groups, breakout rooms, or individually.
4. Students are provided the questions in advance.
5. After the interviews have been conducted, the SCEP Development Team discusses what was learned.

Ways to Organize

School teams can arrange the interviews in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to:

- Having individual SCEP Development Team members conduct interviews with several students at a time.

- Having SCEP Development Team members work in pairs or triads to interview small groups of students (See Example #1).
- Bringing all students together at once, and then having students go to breakout rooms organized around a topic (See Example #2).
- Soliciting topics from students in advance, then arranging asynchronous sessions based on these topics and offering invited students the opportunity to attend multiple asynchronous sessions around topics they are interested in discussing (See Example #3).

EXAMPLE #1: All Students Asked Same Questions

1. SCEP Development Team identifies students to be interviewed.
2. SCEP Development Team members arrange groupings so that team members ask each small group of students the same set of questions. The questions are developed and sent in advance to the students.
3. SCEP Development Team members conduct interviews. These do not need to occur at the same time, though a school may decide to do so.
4. SCEP Development Team convenes and shares what was learned from the interviews with one another.

EXAMPLE #2: Students Select Groups to Join Based on Topics

1. SCEP Development Team identifies topics to be explored, creates a set of questions for each topic, and arranges a schedule so that students will be able to select the breakout room of the topic that most interests them. Three variations on how to arrange this are provided below.

Variation 1 – longer discussion on single topic				Variation 2 – shorter discussion on multiple topics				Variation 3 – shorter discussion, with some topics repeating				
30 mins	Topic A	Topic B	Topic C	15 mins	Topic A	Topic B	Topic C	15 mins	Topic A	Topic B	Topic C	
				15 mins	Topic D	Topic E	Topic F	15 mins	Topic A	Topic B	Topic D	Topic E

Note: These are merely examples. The school would select the number of topics appropriate.

2. SCEP Development Team identifies students to be interviewed. The SCEP Development Team announces to the students the topics that will be discussed and provides a set of questions for each topic.
3. Students convene at the same time and join the breakout group(s) based on the topic they are most interested in discussing. Depending on the way the schedule is developed, students may also be placed into other breakout rooms after discussing the first topic.

EXAMPLE #3: Students Identify Topics and Attend Multiple Sessions When Interested

1. SCEP Development Team selects the students to be interviewed and then surveys those students to learn the topics the students think are important for adults to listen to students and hear their insights.
2. SCEP Development Team reviews the survey results and identifies topics to be discussed.
3. SCEP Development Team identifies the team members that will lead each topic discussion and arranges one meeting for each topic. The meetings are scheduled at different times to allow students to discuss multiple topics if desired.
4. The team then identifies questions for each session and distributes the questions and the schedule to all students to be interviewed. Students are informed that they may join multiple sessions if they are interested.

Example #3 – Students have the opportunity to identify topics and attend multiple sessions.	
April 26, 2 p.m.	Topic A
April 26, 4 p.m.	Topic B
April 27, 3 p.m.	Topic C
April 29, 2 p.m.	Topic D
April 29, 3:30 p.m.	Topic E

- The team should be prepared to use breakout rooms if the number of students attending a specific session limits the opportunity for students to participate if they were to remain in one large group.

Additional Resource

[Discussing Crucial Issues with Youth](#)

- America’s Promise Alliance** has developed a guidance document, [Discussing Crucial Issues with Youth](#) designed to assist adults with leading conversations that will elicit thoughts and perspectives from students. The four topics covered in the document are: 1) Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic; 2) Race and Racism; 3) Virtual and Blended Learning; 4) Communicating across Ideological Differences.

Crafting Questions

SCEP Development Teams are encouraged to develop the questions most appropriate for their students and the approach toward interviews the team has selected. Below are potential questions that the team may find helpful when developing its own set of questions. Remember, please **share the questions in advance with students** so that they can provide full responses that are reflective of their experience and perspective.

We've had to do a number of things differently this year because of all of the disruptions from the pandemic. What are the things that you feel like you've lost from the pandemic?

What are the ways that you've seen yourself grow or learn new things during the pandemic?

What have you learned about yourself in the past year?

What are some things you think are important for all teachers to know about what it is like to be a student at our school?

What are the things that our school is doing because of the pandemic that should be continued once it ends? Why are these important to you?

What signals do you look for to let you know that you are on the right track or off-track in school?

What are your worries for next year?

What are things we could do to help students feel better about being at school?

What questions would you like to ask your teachers? Why?

I want you to think about the best day you've had at our school. What made it your best day?

I am going to tell you a statement, and I want you to think of what comes to mind: "There are adults in this school that look out for kids like me." What does that make you think of?

I am going to tell you a statement, and I want you to think of what comes to mind: "Kids like me are allowed to be ourselves at this school." What do you think about when you hear those words?

If you wanted adults to know one thing about you as a student (or as a teenager), what would you tell them?

In your life both in and out of school, what pressures do you feel to do well? What pressures do you feel to NOT do well?

Topic-Based interviews

One way to provide students with the opportunity to offer meaningful responses is to organize the interviews around topics and **allow students to decide which discussion(s) they will join** (see [Example #2](#) and [Example #3](#) under “Ways to Organize”). This also allows school teams to delve deeper into specific topics with the students most interested in discussing these topics, rather than asking the same questions to all students.

Below are examples of questions that could be asked in topic-based discussions around COVID-19 and Race and Racism. These examples are taken from the document: “[Engaging Young People in How Learning Happens: Discussing Crucial Issues with Youth](#).” School teams may find the full document helpful when considering how to organize their interviews.

TOPIC: NAVIGATING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Overarching question: Young people across the country have shared that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected their overall wellbeing. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you, our school, and your community?

Schools: Find appropriate entry points for your students and develop questions accordingly. Below are examples of the variety of entry points that could exist:

- What are some of the biggest challenges of the pandemic facing students like you?
- How have things changed in your life since the pandemic hit?
- What do you think the effect of the pandemic is on your and your peers’ health, mental health, and wellbeing?
- In what ways has our school taken student voices into consideration when planning or implementing its learning approaches this year? What additional ways do you think our school could take student voices into consideration?
- How have your relationships with your classmates changed? Have you been able to stay connected to your peers? If so, how?
- Are there ways that our school can support young people’s health and wellbeing? If so, what are they?
- What ideas do you have for ways that young people can support their communities this year?

TOPIC: RACE AND RACISM

Overarching Question: In the wake of numerous high-profile instances of race-related incidents, thousands across the country have called for leaders to directly address systemic racism. How has the issue of racism affected you, our school, or your community?

Schools: Find appropriate entry points for your students and develop questions accordingly. Below are examples of the variety of entry points that could exist:

Discussing Race and Racism

- Do you think it is important for you to be able to discuss issues around race at school? Do you want to? Would you feel comfortable?
- What about the environment or the teacher or staff would make you more or less comfortable discussing these issues?
- What do you think is important for teachers to know if they want to, or if they are already, discussing race and racism with students?
- (For students of color) How do you feel when topics of race and/or racism are discussed? What can school adults do to prioritize your wellbeing during these conversations?

Teaching and Learning about Race and Racism

- Do you find that the curriculum (what you are learning about) includes issues of race and racism? If so, do you think these issues are depicted fairly and accurately? If not, how do you think issues of race and racism should be incorporated into the curriculum?

Youth Perspectives on Race in Schools

- Do you think that racism exists at our school?
- What has been done or what could our school do to address or respond to that? How can school staff learn more from youth about issues of race in schools?
- Are there people at school that you feel comfortable talking with about racism at our school?
- Do you feel safe and empowered to call out racism when it occurs in our school?
- What has our school done to create spaces for you to share your opinion and experiences regarding race and/or racism?
- Some schools are creating groups like a student equity committee to look at the curriculum and school policies. What would you think about something like that?

SCEP STUDENT INTERVIEW PRACTICES

Guidance on Listening to Students with Empathy

(adapted from Everyone Graduates Center)

Designing a student-centered plan requires understanding the students and families we serve. Listening to our students with empathy allows us to understand their motivations, emotions, behaviors, and choices. It allows us to understand what students think and why they think it. The purpose of the student interviews is to develop an understanding of the students we serve.

Guidelines for listening and interviewing

1. Ask why often, even if you think you may understand.
2. Ask students to describe frequently. Use prompts like “Can you tell me more about that?” Continually seek details and specific situations.
3. Avoid “usually” when framing a question; ask for specific and concrete examples and stories.
4. Observe nonverbal behaviors and inconsistencies. Both can be interesting to consider and lead to greater understanding.
5. Do not ask questions with yes/no responses. Encourage examples and stories to help you understand. “What was that like for you?”
6. Being silent is ok. Allow time for thinking. Don’t suggest answers.
7. Capture in writing or recording what students say. It’s best to have one person recording while another is asking the questions and eliciting stories and examples.
8. When a question bombs, acknowledge it. Ask the student, “Is this is the right question? What might be a better question? What might we be forgetting?”
9. When a student raises a challenge or problem in the school or a specific class, ask them what they would suggest to a teacher or school leader. “What would have been a better way to handle that situation?”
10. Make sure only one person speaks at a time. Do not allow interruptions.
11. Don’t allow a few to dominate the conversation. Allow opportunities for all students to speak and to listen.

Interview Etiquette

- Introduce yourself.
- Explain to students that they are being interviewed because the school knows that it is important to develop empathy and learn about student experiences. A team is going to develop a plan that takes into account the hopes and needs of the students. The team cannot do this without students!
- Explain to students that their responses might be written down or recorded, but no one will be saying which student said which response.
- Take a moment to build rapport with the students you will interview.
- Once the interview has ended, thank the students for their time and participation.

Considerations for Interviewing Younger Children

Student Interviews will be part of the SCEP Development process for all identified schools. It is important that the SCEP Development team takes into consideration the age and developmental levels of the students being interviewed throughout the process, particularly with elementary school children. While the [Guidance on Listening to Students with Empathy](#) offers suggestions for all students, SCEP Development Teams working with younger students may want to consider the following for their interviews:

- Elementary school teams should plan to speak to students in the upper range of the grades served. For example, a K-2 school should plan to speak with 2nd graders, while a K-5 school will likely plan to speak with 4th and 5th graders.
- Younger students may have a harder time transitioning between topics; minimize abrupt transitions to the greatest extent possible.
- While these strategies are effective for all students, the use of verbal and non-verbal encouragement will likely have the greatest impact with younger students. Use warm body language, and other strategies such as using the interviewee's name and providing encouraging feedback for effort (e.g., "I can see you're thinking hard"). Use the child's own terminology previously offered when possible. Use neutral, non-coercive techniques to indicate that you are listening, such head-nodding, incorporating, "Mm-hmm," and "Uh-huh" as the child is talking, and maintaining an attentive demeanor.
- Younger students may benefit from a "practice" phase in which the session begins with an open-ended question unrelated to the questions identified by the SCEP Development Team (e.g. "I am trying to understand what it is like to be a student here. Can you tell me about what you did right before our meeting?") Having the opportunity to provide a narrative regarding a neutral topic introduces students to this style of interaction and allows interviewers to demonstrate their own listening skills, build trust and rapport, gain a sense of children's language skills and development, and ease them into an interaction where elaborate responses are encouraged. Just two to three minutes can be spent on the "practice" phase. Any event discussed should be pleasant (or neutral) and should be a specific episode with a defined time frame, rather than general questions about what "usually happens."
- When emphasizing that there are no "right answers," Team members interviewing younger children may also want to acknowledge that the interview may differ from the typical way adults and students speak in that in school settings. Often at school, the adult is the expert the student is learning from, but in this interview, since the focus is on learning what it is like to be a student, the student is the expert that the adult is learning from.
- Elementary school teams may find the ["Imagining September" K-5 slide deck](#) designed by MIT researchers to be a helpful resource as they consider the appropriate entry points for conversation.