

Listen: Interviewing Students

Facilitator Guidance Document

Why It's Important

- Student Interviews are a core component of the improvement planning process. Student Interviews provide a means of better understanding the student experience and allow an opportunity for improvement planning team members to develop empathy and gain insights into how practices and initiatives are being received by students. Through the listening process that comes from Student Interviews, the improvement planning team can better develop a plan that considers the hopes and needs of the students. Schools identified for TSI, ATSI, and CSI support will be required to use this process with their SCEP Development Team.

How the Interviews Fit into the Improvement Plan Development Process

- Student interviews are designed to occur after the *Envision* and *Analyze* phases of the Improvement Plan Development Process. The interviews are scheduled to occur at this phase so that they may provide an opportunity to learn more about some of the themes that emerge during the *Envision* and *Analyze* phases.

Needs Assessment and Plan Development Activities	Envision: Exploring the Vision, Values and Aspirations for the school	Analyze: Internal and External Data	Analyze: Survey Data	Analyze: Completing and Discussing the Tenet 1 Inventory	Listen: Interviewing Students	Putting it all Together: Completing the SCEP Planning Document	Writing the Plan	Plan Approval and Next Steps
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- 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.

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Ways to Organize

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

- Having individual team members conduct interviews with several students at a time.
- Having 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 inviting students to attend as many asynchronous sessions as they are interested in discussing (See Example #3).

EXAMPLE #1: All Students Asked Same Questions

1. Team identifies students to be interviewed.
2. 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. Team members conduct interviews. These do not need to occur at the same time, though a school may decide to do so.
4. Team members convene and share what was learned from the interviews with one another.

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

1. Team members identify topics to be explored, create a set of questions for each topic, and arrange 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. Team members identify students to be interviewed. The 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. Team members select the students to be interviewed, and then survey those students to learn the topics the students think are important for adults to listen to students and hear their insights.
2. Team members review the survey results and identify topics to be discussed.
3. Team members identify the team members that will lead each topic discussion and arrange 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

5. 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.

Minimum Requirements for Those Identified for CSI, ATSI, and TSI

Teams have flexibility in how the Student Interviews are arranged. Teams should consider what makes sense for their school. Schools identified for the CSI, ATSI or TSI support model have flexibility as well, but will need to make sure following minimum expectations are followed:

1. Between 10 and 25 students are interviewed.

2. The students interviewed are representative of the student body, and when applicable, include a cross-section of students from both the subgroup(s) for which the school has been identified and other subgroups.
3. The students selected should include those who have a range of academic and behavioral (e.g., attendance, discipline) successes and struggles.
4. Not all students are interviewed together; interviews may occur in small groups, breakout rooms, or individually.
5. Students are provided the questions in advance.
6. After the interviews have been conducted, the Team discusses what was learned.
7. A student survey cannot be used as a substitute for Student Interviews.

Considerations to Promote Equity and Inclusion

Interviews provide an opportunity to better understand the perspectives and experiences of specific students. As the team listens to students, it is important that diversity, equity, and inclusion are considered throughout the interview process.

In addition to making sure that the students interviewed will allow for a diverse range of perspectives, teams will want to consider how the insights shared by students may or may not yield insights into the school's efforts to promote equity and inclusion. The following reflective questions are offered as suggestions for teams to consider as they interview students:

- In group sessions, how are we providing space for all to share?
- Are we encouraging certain answers over others? How might we show that we value the perspectives of all that share with us, even when what they share may not be popular?
- How are making sure that some voices are not dominating the conversation at the expense of others?
- How are we making decisions about whether what we are hearing is one individual's experience or something that extends beyond that individual?
- Are there voices that might be overlooked/unheard that we can invite into the conversation?

Teams may also find the Department's resources on [Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Practices](#) and the Board of Regents' [Framework on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in New York's Schools: A Call to Action](#) useful in exploring this topic further.

Crafting Questions

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 than how we used to do things before 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 over the past year?

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 new this year that should be continued next year? 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?

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 for 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 schools identified for TSI, ATSI and CSI. It is important that any improvement planning 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, Improvement Plan Development Teams working with younger students may want to consider the following:

- 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 improvement planning 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 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.