



New York State  
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT  
Knowledge > Skill > Opportunity

# School Focus Groups Guide



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 school selected this option because the school wanted to learn more about the thoughts and ideas of students and parents, so the school is hoping that each participant will be completely honest.
4. Make clear that the focus group is not intended to assign blame. Participants should refrain from identifying specific individuals when sharing their perceptions and experiences as best as possible.
5. If the facilitator is concerned that the conversation has become too negative or too focused on sharing complaints, the facilitator can redirect by asking for examples of positive experiences or by asking for strategies to improve the concerns shared.
6. Make clear at the beginning that the school is interested in trends that may exist. One strategy the facilitator can use to assess if the experiences shared are typical or atypical is to ask for a quick show of hands if others had similar experiences.
7. Make clear that the participants in the focus group should not share with others the experiences shared during the session.
8. Make clear at the start that you (the facilitator) may need to interrupt at various points to keep the conversation moving.
9. Make clear at the start that participants should be mindful of the need to keep the conversation moving forward and the need to allow everyone the opportunity to speak, so no one participant should monopolize the focus group's time.

## 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>

## Sample Focus Group Script

<p><b>Welcome</b></p> <p>(5 minutes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good Evening! I'm _____ (name) and I work as a _____ (position) here at _____ (school name).</li> <li>• We appreciate your participation in our focus group today. Please find seat and make sure to _____ (grab a snack, help yourself to dinner, etc). Please sign in at the front of the room. We will begin in a few minutes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State the Purpose</b></p> <p>(5 minutes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are conducting a series of focus groups this year in order to understand the how students and parents feel about the school.</li> <li>• The school developed these focus groups as a way to learn more about what is on your minds, so I want you to know that the school hopes you will be as honest as possible with your responses.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Explain the Format</b></p> <p>(2 minutes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'll briefly go over the format of our focus group today. I am going to be asking several different questions, and after each question, I will provide time for you to share your thoughts and opinions on the question.</li> <li>• My colleague _____ (note taker) is assisting me tonight by taking notes on our discussion. Please know that _____ (note taker) is not writing down anyone's name with these notes, and that we will not be sharing with anyone outside of this group the names of anyone who said specific things.</li> <li>• Part of my job as the facilitator is to keep the conversation moving. I imagine there may be times when I interrupt, so I want to apologize in advance. I want to make sure we have a productive discussion that allows each of you to speak openly, so I may need to insert myself at times to make sure that we can hear from everyone and cover what we need to cover.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Focus Group Agreement</b></p> <p>(10 minutes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before we begin, I'm going to go over some important ground rules to ensure we can have a productive session.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• We will be taking notes. You will remain anonymous. The information gathered here today will remain confidential.</li> <li>• Please respect the privacy of the other focus group participants in the room by not sharing with others outside of the focus group details about what individual people shared.</li> <li>• We will provide a summary of the discussion to the principal, but no names will be used in the summary.</li> <li>• Please listen actively. Please be respectful of one another's experiences and opinions. All comments are important—we want a wide range of opinions.</li> <li>• We want to hear from YOU. Please respond one at a time and try to keep your responses less than one minute in length. Give everyone the opportunity to participate.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Focus Group</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Optional) Have each participant introduce themselves to the group.</li> <li>• Facilitator will ask question #1, give time for participants to share their thoughts. When helpful, the facilitator may ask follow-up questions for</li> </ul>

<p>(Time is dependent on schedule/ approximately 30 minutes)</p>	<p>clarification or to keep the conversation moving. After completing question #1, the facilitator will move to question #2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The facilitator and note taker should have a general idea of how long to spend on each question and should monitor the time throughout the discussion to make sure the group remains on track.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Wrap Up</b>  (10 minutes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great, everyone. It's time to wrap up. Is there anything anyone would like to add before we leave here tonight?</li> <li>• 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!</li> </ul>

## 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 can then decide how to respond to the feedback and themes. The principal may want to incorporate the themes into questions at future focus groups. For example, if a key theme was that parents felt communication was inconsistent and the principal put structures in place to address this, the facilitator could ask at a later meeting with parents if parents are finding the communication to be more

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.