

NYSED Needs Assessment

Family Focus Groups

Purpose

Family focus groups are designed to help school teams **learn more about variations** identified in the [Family Survey](#) and understand how schoolwide systems and structures show up in families' lived experiences.

These conversations focus on:

- Whether school practices feel **consistent across classrooms, teachers, and years**
- Whether expectations and communication feel **coherent over time**
- Whether students and families experience a strong sense of **belonging regardless of assignment or circumstance**

The goal is **not** to evaluate individual teachers or address individual concerns, but to understand whether the school's *intended systems* are experienced as **schoolwide and dependable**.

How Family Focus Groups Fit into the Needs Assessment Process

- Family focus groups are meant to occur **after**:
 - The [Family Survey](#) has been administered and reviewed
 - The school team has identified **specific areas of variation or uncertainty** in survey responses
- **These focus groups are optional for schools serving grades 4 to 12.** Schools that are finding significant variation in their family survey data may decide it would be helpful to connect with families to better understand their experiences.
- **The groups are required for schools in the CSI, ATSI, and TSI support models that do not serve any students in grades 4 to 12.**
- Focus groups are used to:
 - Learn more about *why* families responded the way they did
 - Understand how systems look and feel from the family perspective
 - Clarify root causes behind inconsistent or uneven experiences

Preparing for the Focus Group

Before the Session

The team should:

- Review [Family Survey](#) results and identify a **limited number (1-3) priority areas** where:
 - Responses vary widely
 - Scores are notably lower or mixed
 - Families selected "I don't know" at high rates
- Select **specific survey questions** to explore more deeply.
- Develop **4 to 6 focus questions** tied directly to those survey items.
- Share the focus group purpose (not the survey data) with families in advance.

Organizing the Focus Group

Recommended structure

- 6 to 12 parents/family members per group
- Use multiple rooms as needed to prevent the rooms from getting too large

- 45 to 60 minutes total
- In-person and/or virtual option provided
- Interpretation services provided as needed

Facilitation roles

- One facilitator (leads conversation) per room
- One note-taker (captures themes, not names) per room

Framing the Focus Group

Below is an example script to introduce the focus group:

Thank you for being here and for taking the time to share your perspective.

We're meeting today to better understand families' experiences with how our school works day to day. Earlier this spring, families completed a survey about learning, student support, and attendance. This conversation helps us learn more about what those survey responses mean in real life.

This is **not** a meeting to evaluate individual teachers or to address specific student situations. Instead, we're listening for patterns across families so we can strengthen the routines and structures across the school.

There are no right or wrong answers. We're interested in your honest experiences. Please share with us what feels consistent, what feels confusing, and what helps your child feel supported.

Your responses will be kept anonymous. We'll focus on themes, not individual comments.

Please feel free to pass on any question you don't feel comfortable answering.

Norms for the Conversation (Suggested)

- Allow everyone a chance to speak.
- Listen with respect, even when experiences differ
- Focus on patterns, what most commonly occurs, rather than isolated incidents
- Focus on trends that have occurred during your experience, rather than individual staff
- The facilitator may need to interrupt to keep the conversation focused and steer the conversation forward to be respectful of everyone's time. If that happens, please don't take it personally!

Crafting Interview Questions

Focus group questions should:

- Be directly connected to specific family survey items.
- Center on families' experience of **schoolwide systems and structures**, not individual teachers or staff members.
- Help explain **why variation exists** in family experience (for example, differences across siblings, grade levels, or years).
- Elicit insight into **consistency and coherence** to understand whether expectations, communication, and supports feel similar across classrooms and over time.
- Example questions are provided as a starting point; school teams are encouraged to adapt wording to fit their families and community context.

Avoid questions that:

- Ask families to evaluate or name specific teachers or staff members.
- Invite broad complaints, venting, or general wish lists disconnected from survey findings.

- Focus only on single events or isolated experiences rather than patterns over time.
- Introduce new topics unrelated to the priority variations identified through survey review.

Sample Questions

Example 1

Priority Variation: A wide variation was identified on the family survey questions:

- *"The amount and type of work my child does seems similar to what happens in other classrooms or grade levels."*
- *"Teachers' expectations for learning seem similar across classrooms."*

Focus:

Understanding whether academic expectations and rigor are experienced as schoolwide norms or depend on the classroom or teacher.

Sample Questions:

- When you think about your child's learning, how similar or different does the work feel compared to other students in the same grade?
- When you talk with other families who have children the same age but in different classes, does it seem like students are working on similar kinds of assignments and learning goals, or does it depend a lot on the class?
- For families with more than one child, how consistent have expectations felt across siblings or classrooms?
- Are there times when it feels to you like expectations change depending on which teacher your child has? What do you notice that makes you feel that way?

Example 2

Priority Variation: A wide variation was identified on the family survey questions:

- *"There is at least one adult at school who knows my child well and looks out for them."*
- *"Students like my child are understood and supported at this school."*

Focus:

Understanding whether students being "known" is a schoolwide structure or dependent on individual relationships.

Sample Questions:

- How confident do you feel that someone at school would notice if something wasn't right with your child, no matter which teacher they have?
- During the school year, do you feel your child is noticed and supported by adults even when they don't ask for help, or mostly when your child speaks up?
- What helps you feel confident that your child won't be overlooked at school? Where do you see gaps or inconsistencies?
- When the school year begins, does it feel like your child's new teacher already understands your child, or do you usually need to explain things all over again?
- We noticed that the survey question *"Students like my child are understood and supported at this school"* had scores lower than some of the other questions. Based on your experience and from what you hear from other parents, why do you think that is?

Example 3

Priority Variation: A wide variation was identified on the family survey question:

- *“The expectations from adults seem consistent across classrooms.”*

Focus:

Understanding whether expectations for behavior, effort, and participation feel predictable and fair across the school.

Sample Questions:

- How consistent do expectations feel from one classroom or teacher to another?
- Are there moments when you feel unsure about expectations because they seem to be different from class to class or constantly changing? What does that look like?
- What would make expectations feel more predictable across the school?

Example 4

Priority Variation: A wide variation was identified on the family survey questions:

- *“The school communicates clearly with families about attendance expectations.”*
- *“Attendance concerns are handled in ways that feel supportive rather than punitive.”*

Focus:

Understanding how consistently attendance expectations and responses are experienced by families.

Sample Questions:

- How clear are attendance expectations for families, and do they feel consistent over time?
- When attendance becomes a concern, what differences do you notice in how the school responds?
- What makes attendance communication feel supportive versus stressful or discouraging?
- How might we be more supportive with our attendance concerns?

Example 5

Priority Variation: A wide variation was identified on the family survey question:

- *“Overall, I believe this school provides a consistent and supportive experience for all students, not just depending on which teacher they have.”*

Focus:

Understanding whether families experience the school as a cohesive system rather than a collection of individual classrooms.

Sample Questions:

- What experiences make the school feel consistent and dependable for families?
- Where does it feel like experiences depend too much on the teacher or situation?
- When you talk to parents who have children in other classrooms, what sounds the same about what they experience? What sounds different?
- What would help families feel confident that all students receive a similar experience, regardless of who their child’s teacher is?

Key Reminders for Teams

1. The team is looking to understand how consistent practices are across the school. After one parent responds to a question, take the time to go around the room to hear from others with prompts like “Does that sound like other’s experiences? Has anyone experienced something different?” When you are hearing that experiences differ, this suggests that the structures are not consistent across the school.
2. If families describe:
 - “It depends on the teacher”
 - “It changed when my child moved grades”
 - “My kids had very different experiences”

These are signals that suggest structures are inconsistent or non-existent.

Closing The Focus Group

Below is a **sample closing** to use with families participating in the focus group:

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. What you said will help us think about how we can make things more consistent across the school and what could be improved for students and families. Is there anything else you think we should know about how the school works for you and your family?