

NYSED Needs Assessment

Student Interviews

Purpose of Student Interviews in the Needs Assessment Process

- Student interviews are used to better understand **how schoolwide systems and structures are experienced by students**, particularly when survey or data results show **variation**.
- These interviews are designed to help school teams understand:
 - Where systems feel **consistent or inconsistent** across classes, grades, or groups of students
 - Whether students experience **coherence** in expectations, support, and learning
 - How school structures contribute to students' **sense of belonging**
- Student interviews are not open-ended listening sessions. They are a **focused follow-up** to the [Student Survey](#) and data review, intended to clarify **why** students experience school differently and what that suggests about underlying structures.
- Student interviews are used to help school teams better understand **specific variations in student experience** that have already been identified through the [Student Survey](#) and through the data review.

How the Interviews Fit into the Improvement Plan Development Process

- Student interviews occur **after** teams have:
 - Administered the [Student Survey](#)
 - Reviewed Student Survey results and identified **specific variations** (Meeting 3)
 - Reviewed the NYSED Field Support Assessment Report and identified any specific variations (Meeting 3)
- Interviews are used to learn more about specific variations, **not to identify new focus areas**.

Student Surveys do not take the place of Student Interviews. They are required for all schools serving students in grades 4 to 12. Schools that do not serve students above grade 3 should conduct [Family Focus Groups](#) in lieu of Student Interviews.

What We Mean By Variation

In this needs assessment, a *variation* refers to a meaningful difference in narrow areas. Teams should be honing in on specific survey questions that are rated lower than others. These often show differences in how students experience their learning. Variations often appear when:

- Students report inconsistent expectations across classes
- Some students feel supported while others do not
- Practices feel predictable in some settings but not others
- Belonging varies by grade, course, or student group
- Students are performing better in one subject or grade than in others
- Student interviews help teams understand **what students experience differently and why**, so school-level structures can be strengthened.

Selecting the Focus for Student Interviews

Before planning interviews, teams should clearly answer:

- Which [survey item\(s\)](#) show meaningful variation?

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- Which **schoolwide structure** does this relate to?
 - Rigorous, Standards-Aligned Curriculum & Instruction
 - Every Child Thrives
 - Attendance
- Are there any variations in **performance data** we wish to learn more about?

Interviews should remain anchored to this focus throughout.

Organizing Student Interviews

Interviews are used to learn more about schoolwide systems and structures that may be contributing to the variation seen in survey results or other data sources.

Determining Who to Invite

1. Interview between 8–20 students.
2. **The guidance below applies to students in grades 4 or higher**, since these are the students that took the Student Survey. Elementary schools that do not serve students in grades 4 or higher **are required to have [Family Focus Groups](#)** in lieu of the student interviews.
3. Because the focus is on consistency and coherence, elementary, middle school, and high schools should **prioritize interviewing students that have attended the school for more than one year.**
4. Ensure a representative sample of students, including relevant subgroups.
5. Include a mix of students with varied academic and behavioral experiences.
6. Conduct interviews in small groups and breakout rooms so that no more than five students are interviewed at once.

Preparing in Advance for the Interview

1. Teams will need to prepare their starter questions prior to the interview and **provide the questions in advance to participating students.**
2. NYSED strongly recommends that the school notify families of those selected to be interviewed and share the questions with them as well. Below is a sample notification to consider:

Dear Families and Caregivers,

As part of our school's improvement planning process, we will be speaking with a small group of students in the coming weeks to better understand their day-to-day experience at school.

These conversations help us learn how schoolwide routines, expectations, and supports are working for students, especially in areas where experiences may differ across classes, grades, or groups of students. The goal is to strengthen our systems that help all students feel supported, challenged, and included.

Your child was selected to participate so we can hear a range of student perspectives. Participation is not connected to behavior, grades, or performance, and students are not being asked to evaluate individual teachers or classmates.

To support transparency, we are sharing the interview questions in advance and including them with this message. Students will not be expected to prepare answers; this is simply to help families understand the focus of the conversation.

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A few important things to know:

- *Student responses will be kept confidential and will not be shared with names attached.*
- *Interviews will focus on schoolwide experiences, not individual people.*
- *Students may skip any question they do not wish to answer.*
- *Nothing students share will affect their grades or how they are treated at school.*

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's participation, please contact [school contact name] at [contact information].

Thank you for partnering with us as we work to improve our school for all students.

Sincerely,

Framing the Interview

Below is a **sample introduction** to use with students being interviewed:

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today.

We're talking with students because we want to better understand how school works for students, especially in areas where experiences may be different across classes, grades, or groups of students.

You are not here because of anything you did or said. We're not talking about individual teachers or students.

We're trying to learn about schoolwide routines, expectations, and supports so we can make school better for everyone.

There are no right or wrong answers. We're interested in what school feels like from your point of view. If you don't understand a question, or if something doesn't apply to you, just say so.

Your name will not be shared, and nothing you say will affect your grades or how you are treated at school.

If at any point you want to pass on a question, that's fine.

Let's get started.

Rather than start with a targeted variation question, you may find it useful to start with a general question to start:

- *What's one thing that helps you feel comfortable or supported at school?*

Crafting Interview Questions

Interview questions should:

- Be directly connected to specific survey items or variations in performance data.
- Focus on **student experience of systems, not individual teachers**
- Help explain **why variation exists**
- Example questions are provided below; school teams are encouraged to revise these to fit their students.

Avoid questions that:

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- Ask students to evaluate teachers
- Invite broad complaints or wish lists
- Introduce new topics unrelated to the priority variations identified from the survey review and data review.

Examples

Example 1

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

- *“The amount of challenge in my classes feels about the same from one teacher to another.”*
- *“Teachers across classes use similar expectations for what good work looks like.”*

Interview focus:

Understanding how students experience differences in expectations, challenge, and support across classes.

Sample questions:

- When you think about your classes, how similar or different do they feel in terms of what teachers expect from you?
- Are there classes where the work feels much easier or much harder than others? What do you think causes that?
- How clear is it, across your classes, what “good work” looks like?

Example 2

Priority Variation: The responses to these survey questions were quite low compared to others:

- *“There is at least one adult who really knows me.”*
- *“Teachers and staff notice when I’m having a hard time.”*

Interview focus:

Understanding how school structures support adult-student relationships.

Sample questions:

- How easy is it for students to find an adult they trust at this school?
- How do adults usually show that they know or care about students?
- Are there times when students struggle but adults don’t notice right away?
- Why do you think some students might have said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that staff notice when they are having a hard time?
- What routines or moments help adults get to know students better?
- What would help students feel more comfortable asking for help?

Example 3

Priority Variation: The performance results are much higher in ELA than they are in Math.

Interview focus:

Understanding how schoolwide systems and structures support (or limit) deep thinking, productive struggle, and access to grade-level learning across content areas, especially math.

Sample Framing Question:

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- We noticed that students at this school tend to do better in ELA than in math. We're trying to understand how learning works in different classes. How does learning feel different in your math classes compared to your ELA classes?

Follow-Up Question Sets for Example 3

(Teams do not need to ask all questions. Select 3–6 that best fit the group and time.) As you listen to responses, it may be worth asking if what one student says matches what others experience as a way to understand how consistent practices and expectations are.

Questions to learn more about: Expectations and Cognitive Demand	Questions to learn more about: Support without Straying from Grade-Level Content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In which subject are you more often asked to explain your thinking or show how you got an answer? • How often do you talk about why an answer is correct in math compared to ELA? • In math, do teachers usually want one right answer, or do they care about how you got there? • Which class makes you think harder most days? What makes it feel that way? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you get stuck in math, what usually happens? What does the help look like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Does the help usually show you <i>how to do the problem</i>, or help you understand <i>why it works</i>? ◦ Do you ever feel like you're copying steps without really knowing why they work? Can you tell me about a time that happened? • How does getting help in math feel different from getting help in ELA? • Think about the last time you got help in math. What did the adult say or do? What did <i>you</i> do after that?
Questions to learn more about: Consistency Across Classrooms	Questions to learn more about: Classroom Routines and Structures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From one year to the next, does math usually work in similar ways, or does it feel very different each year? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What usually stays the same? What usually changes? • From one year to the next, does ELA usually work in similar ways, or does it feel very different each year? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What usually stays the same? What usually changes? • If a new student joined your school next year, what would you tell them about how math usually works here? What about ELA? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does a typical math class look like from start to finish? • How is that similar to or different from a typical ELA class? • How often do you work through problems together in math? • How often do you get time to talk through ideas before being expected to answer?
Questions to learn more about: Belonging and Risk-Taking	Questions to learn more about: Catching up and Staying on Track
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In which subject do you feel more comfortable making mistakes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you fall behind in math, how easy is it to catch up?

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<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do teachers respond when students get something wrong in math?• Do students participate as much in math discussions as in ELA? Why or why not?• What makes it easier or harder to speak up in math class?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does catching up in math compare to catching up in ELA?• What helps students stay on track in math when they miss something?
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Optional Closing Question

- If adults wanted math to feel more like ELA in terms of learning and support, what would need to change?

Considerations to Promote Equity

Because interviews are targeted, teams should be intentional about whose experiences are included.

Consider:

- Are we including students most affected by the identified variation?
- Are we hearing from students who experience school differently?
- Are we distinguishing between individual experiences and broader patterns?
- Are we ensuring that all voices are heard during interviews?

Closing The Interview

Below is a **sample closing** to use with students being interviewed:

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. What you said will help adults think about how school systems work and what could be improved for students. Is there anything else you think adults should know about how school works for students?

Guidance on Listening to Students with Empathy

(adapted from Everyone Graduates Center)

Listening with empathy helps teams understand how school systems feel from the student perspective. The goal is not to problem-solve in the moment, but to listen carefully so improvement planning strengthens structures that promote consistency, coherence, and belonging for all students.

Guidelines for Listening and Interviewing

1. **Ask "Why" Often:** Even if you think you understand, always seek deeper insight.
2. **Encourage Descriptions:** Use prompts like "Can you tell me more?" to get specific examples and details.
3. **Avoid Generalities:** Ask for concrete examples, not vague terms like "usually."
4. **Observe Nonverbal Cues:** Pay attention to body language and inconsistencies for deeper understanding.
5. **Avoid Yes/No Questions:** Encourage examples and stories instead of simple answers.
6. **Allow Silence:** Give students time to think and avoid suggesting answers.
7. **Record Responses:** One person should ask questions, while another records responses.
8. **Acknowledge "Bombed" Questions:** If a question doesn't work, ask the student for a better question.
9. **Ask for Solutions:** If a student identifies a problem, ask how they would handle it.
10. **Ensure One Speaker:** Make sure only one person speaks at a time and prevent interruptions.
11. **Balance Participation:** Ensure all students have a chance to speak and be heard.

Interview Etiquette

- **Introduce Yourself:** Briefly introduce who you are and why you're conducting the interview.
- **Explain the Purpose:** Tell students their responses will inform a plan that reflects their hopes and needs, and that their identities will remain anonymous.
- **Build Rapport:** Take a moment to make the student feel comfortable.
- **Thank Students:** Always thank them for their time and participation once the interview ends.

Interviewing Elementary-Age Children

Schools identified for TSI, ATSI, and CSI support working with students in grades 4 and 5 may find it useful to incorporate the following in their conversations:

- **Minimize Abrupt Transitions:** Avoid sudden topic shifts to help these students stay engaged.
- **Use Verbal and Non-Verbal Encouragement:** Use positive body language, the student's name, and feedback to support them (e.g., "I see you're thinking hard").
- **Practice Phase:** Begin with an open-ended question unrelated to the main interview topics to help younger students adjust (e.g., "What did you do before this meeting?"). This helps build rapport and makes them comfortable.
- **Emphasize No "Right Answers":** Remind students that there are no right answers and that they are the experts in this interview.