

**TRAINING HANDBOOK**

# Organizing and Facilitating Focus Groups

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### **Acknowledgment**

This focus group facilitators' guide was developed by Laura Reilly, APR, Reilly Arts and Letters.

### **Additional information sources for this manual include:**

- Everyday Democracy - [www.everyday-democracy.org](http://www.everyday-democracy.org)
- Webcredible (User Research) - [www.webcredible.co.uk](http://www.webcredible.co.uk)
- "Methods to conduct focus groups and the moderator's role" - AORN Journal, May, 2000 by Suzanne C. Beyea, Leslie H. Nicoll
- eHOW - [www.ehow.com](http://www.ehow.com)



# Introduction

Only by listening can a school board understand community perspectives. Focus groups are one tool that can help school boards and district leadership teams listen more deeply to understand community views.

Focus groups—small groups of people brought together for a specific discussion—can be a useful way for school districts to develop a clearer understanding of the issues they face. Such groups offer several advantages.

- They can be useful in testing ideas for vision setting or other aspects of public involvement.
- They can assist district leaders in understanding underlying issues and concerns of stakeholder groups on an issue, so that communication can be better tailored to meet the information needs of different audiences.
- They can be used as a step toward conducting a larger meeting or community conversation—that is, a way to help establish the agenda or anticipate public reaction to key points. By starting with small groups rather than plunging directly into a large public meeting, school officials are less likely to be surprised by concerns that might derail a larger meeting.
- They allow participants to hear the views of others and develop a common language about their schools as well as respect for one another's interests.

A facilitator organizes the questions to ask, keeps the group on track, helps to clarify thinking, and draw out ideas within the group. Trained facilitators may be available within your community through consulting groups, local businesses, or universities. Depending on the issue and the scope of your need, your board may find it worthwhile to use the services of a professional facilitator.

Many educators, however, have obtained facilitation skills as part of their education or professional development. This guide provides a basic toolkit to support facilitation of focus groups using such internal resources. The key is ensuring that the facilitator and recorder remain objective and do not try to influence the group's response, so that your district leadership team receives credible insights from the process.



## FOCUS GROUPS

# Why Hold a Focus Group?

Focus groups are different from surveys. Surveys assume that people know how they feel about a particular issue. Often, people aren't sure how they feel. Sometimes it can help to hear the opinions of others and have an opportunity to dialogue about the issue in small groups. Focus groups can offer a safe, personal way to share opinions and ideas.

### Elements of Focus Groups

<b>Format</b>	Group session
<b>Size</b>	8-12 per session; invite twice as many
<b>Length</b>	45 - 90 minutes
<b>Number of sessions (groups)</b>	Varies, but should be more than 3
<b>Participants</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Selected; invited</li> <li>2. Homogenous Groups (but not friends)</li> </ol>
<b>Forms of data</b>	Mostly qualitative (anecdotal) with some number data
<b>Data collection</b>	Notes taken by note takers, or recorders
<b>Facilitator</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Unbiased</li> <li>2. Flexible, but focused</li> <li>3. Uses script, but allows for questions that encourage discussion among participants</li> </ol>
<b>Elements being noted by recorder</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Conversation, including tone of voice if applicable</li> <li>2. Responses to questions in script</li> <li>3. Non-verbal communications - eye rolling, silence, arms folded, audibly heavy sighs, etc</li> <li>4. Note of recurring themes</li> </ol>

### NOTES

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## FOCUS GROUPS

# Outline of the Focus Group Process

## 1 Clearly define the purpose of the focus group.

The first step is to identify what information about your school you would like to understand better, and then formulate some objectives relating to the issues. Your objectives should be as specific as possible. The clarity of your objectives directly affects the quality of the group results.

## 2 Clarify the role of the facilitator.

The facilitator is the key to the focus group discussion. Using the question protocol, the facilitator directs the discussion without being a part of it. The facilitator should allow the discussion to lead in new directions as long as the topics pertain to the subject of the focus group interview.

## 3 Plan the interview questions.

Develop a set of questions based on your goals. The intent of the questions is to provide an overall direction for the session and stimulate discussion.

## 4 Prepare the script and recorder's document.

Compose a script of the main questions you plan to ask every group. It's important to stick to the script (with some flexibility when probing to get information or encourage discussion) in

order to collect useful data.

## 5 Identify and recruit participants.

Identify the types of people who may be able to provide you with the data that will help you evaluate and improve your program or issue. Consider forming several separate groups that represent different viewpoints.

## 6 Invite participants.

The invitation should explain why you are having the focus group session and how you will use the results. It should be made clear that individual comments made during the focus group are strictly confidential.

## 7 Prepare for the participants.

The meeting room should be quiet, comfortable, and free from outside distractions. Participants should sit around a table so they can see each other. Since your participants are volunteers, it's important to serve lunch or light refreshments to show appreciation for their time. Provide notepaper and pens for the participants and any handouts they may need to better understand the issue.

## 8 Prepare to record the session.

Each facilitator should have a person to record responses of the group. The recorder is given a "recorder's document" to assist in organizing the information and for taking notes on the dynamics of the group.

## 9 Conduct the focus group.

See tips on facilitation.

## 10 Analyze the data.

The focus group will generate a lot of information. In order to analyze the data, you should summarize it and group key words or phrases into categories. By grouping the key words, central themes and issues will emerge. Use of the recorder's documents will assist in getting consistent information from group to group.

## 11 Report the findings.

Report both quantitative and qualitative results. Quantitative results are statistical or numerical in nature — the number of people who mentioned X and the percent of people who think Y. Qualitative results are representative of responses and comments from focus group participants. You can directly quote comments, making sure not to identify the speakers.





## FOCUS GROUPS

# Role of the Facilitator

The facilitator plays a vital role in keeping the discussion on track, on time, and fair to all participants. Begin the meeting by helping participants relax. You can have them introduce themselves and say something about why the issue is important to them. Or, simply ask them to say their name and how long they have worked in the school, or organization, and whether or not they live in the community. Facilitators need to explain the purpose of the group, what is expected of participants, and what will happen to the results. Assure the participants about anonymity and confidentiality, asking also that they respect this and do not pass on what has been said in the group to third parties. It is useful to start the meeting with ground rules. (Sample ground rules are below.) Also introduce your recorder so everyone knows who this person is and why he or she is taking notes.

### Sample Ground Rules

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Share “air time.”
- If you are offended or uncomfortable, say so, and say why.
- It’s OK to disagree, but don’t personalize it; stick to the issue.
- No name-calling or stereotyping.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Personal stories stay in the group, unless we all agree that we can share them.
- We share responsibility for making the conversation productive.

### Key Facilitation Skills

- Reflecting and Clarifying
- Summarizing
- Shifting Focus
- Asking Probing or Follow-Up Questions
- Managing Conflict
- Using Silence
- Using Non-Verbal
- Signals (Body Language)

### NOTES

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## FOCUS GROUPS

# Facilitator Tips

### To encourage discussion:

- Ask participants to think about an issue for a few minutes and write down their responses to the question.
- Ask each participant to read - and elaborate on - one of their responses.
- Note the responses on a flipchart/whiteboard (the recorder may also take notes, but if the group is not responsive, it might be helpful for them to see responses on a flip chart or board).
- Once everyone has given a response, ask participants for a second or third response, until all of their answers are noted. These responses can then be discussed.

### Sample Questions and Probes to Get Additional Information:

Question 1: How satisfied are you with the district's current grading policy?

Probes: What needs to change? What is working well? What do you like most?

Question 2: What is your view of the proposed (revised) grading policy?

Probes: What seems unfair? What would make it fair?

Question 3: Do you feel that you have a say in policies affecting your child?

Probes: What are the benefits to your child as a result of the proposed grading policy?  
Do you foresee any problems for your child with the proposed policy?

Question 4: How do you think the proposed grading policy might improve the school district?

Probes: What do you think would improve? What would not improve?

Question 5: Do you feel well-informed about the proposed new grading policy?

Probes: Do you receive enough information? Does the information you receive from the district make sense to you? Do you have unanswered questions? What would you like more information about?

Question: How satisfied are you with the amount of time students spend in class on learning the coursework and material?

Probes: \_\_\_\_\_

Question: How do you think the proposed plan to establish a uniform dress code might affect student life on campus?

Probes: \_\_\_\_\_



## FOCUS GROUPS

# Group Dynamics

### Handling Constructive Conflict

- Create shared ground rules to cover conflict. Ask the group, “How shall we handle disagreements between group members?”
- Encourage speakers to use “I” messages, such as, “I feel strongly that people who send their children to our school have a responsibility to be involved.” Remind people to speak for themselves, not for others or a group.
- Ask the people in conflict, and the larger group, to help focus the conversation by saying, “What do you think is the root of the disagreement between James and Jessie? What are the key issues here?” This takes the focus off of the people, and puts it on the issue at hand.
- Invite people to share the experiences that led to the formation of their opinions, saying, “Could you tell us more about any experiences in your life that have affected your feelings and thoughts about this issue?”
- Invite others into the conversation if conflict is escalating between two people. For example, say “We’ve heard quite a bit from John and Jane. Would someone else like to offer an opinion?” By bringing the larger group into the discussion, the focus shifts to a more general conversation.

### A number of potential problems could arise during focus groups, which will need to be addressed:

- If one participant tries to dominate the session, the facilitator should invite each person to speak in turn.
- Avoid interviewing friends in the same group as they can form cliques. If cliques do form, suggest taking a break and changing seating positions upon returning from the break.
- Avoid personal confrontation - allow the group to police itself (e.g. “do others in the group agree?”).
- Respect someone’s right to be quiet, but do give him or her a chance to share their ideas 1-to-1 (e.g. during a break).
- Use differences of opinion as a topic of discussion - the facilitator should avoid taking sides.

### Handling Unproductive Conflict

- I Interrupt and remind group members of ground rules if the conversation becomes heated.
- I Intervene immediately and stop the conversation if it becomes personal or confrontational.
- I Take a short break.
- I Speak to individuals privately and ask them to comply with the ground rules.
- I As a last resort, remove disruptive members.





## FOCUS GROUPS

# Finishing the Focus Group

When you have finished your focus group, thank the participants for taking part and leave a contact name and number in case they wish to follow up any of the issues that have been raised during the discussion. It's good practice to offer a copy of the report to anybody who wants one.

### What to Do With the Results?

#### Interpreting Data – How to make your gathered information into a useful tool.

You have done your survey; you have completed your focus groups. You are confronted with pages full of questions and answers or flip-chart sheets that are spilling over with ideas. Now what? Collating the information can be both messy and instructive. Stay with the process and valuable data will emerge.

If you have asked for input by giving numerical responses (such as rate your answers on a scale of 1 to 5) then you will collate those responses to determine how satisfied people are with your services or how much they agree or disagree with the questions asked. You will then have a range of responses related to how people are thinking about the issues raised in your survey. From there you need to think about how those answers can be put to use informing the direction of your program.

If you have used open-ended questions or have information gathered on flip charts or tape recorders, you will need to gather it together into meaningful units. If you have responses to open-ended questions, the place to start will be to collate the answers to each question thus grouping your results. So, all your responses to question number one are put together, all your responses to question number two are put together and so on. From there, you look at what the responses are saying. Look for key words or phrases in those responses and group those responses together. Pretty soon you will realize that you are looking at themes emerging from the data. Information from focus groups can also be analyzed by looking for key words, phrases, and themes.

When you have clusters of key words, phrases or ideas, you will begin to see that responses are really revolving around the issues that are important to people. That information could be put to use in promoting the new program, or could be used to communicate more about issues surrounding the program.

### NOTES

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