

## Senate Bill 100 (Public Act 099-0456) Focus Group Materials

### What is a Focus Group?

Focus groups are used to gather information from a target audience usually composed of six to twelve people. Focus groups are guided through a facilitated discussion in order to gather the opinions of the participants. The goal is to promote a meaningful dialogue that could not be achieved using a survey or interview. It is important to note that focus groups are used to gather information, not to make decisions or complete tasks.

### Selecting Participants

Ideally, focus groups should be homogeneous in terms of one or two desired characteristics. In this case, teachers, education support professionals, and students are our target audiences. Even though participants in a focus group are homogenous in terms of one or two desired characteristics, the focus group must also include enough diversity in other characteristics to provide an accurate portrayal of the group's collective opinion. For example, in a focus group of teachers, it may be seen as desirable to ensure diversity of grade levels taught, content area expertise, years of service, as well as gender and race.

### Moderating the Focus Group

Focus groups are approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. They may be conducted around a large table or with participants seated in a circle of chairs. A moderator welcomes the group and asks a series of approximately six to ten open-ended questions. An assistant moderator or recorder takes notes.

This document has prepared a set of focus group questions. Focus group questions should be short, open-ended, and one-dimensional (i.e., only asking one question at a time). Throughout the focus group, moderators often use two common techniques to elicit responses from participants who may be reluctant to contribute to the discussion, the pause and the probe.

The pause is a period of silence after a question is asked. Although a five second pause may seem awkward, it is usually successful in encouraging a response from the group. There is usually at least one participant who is willing to break the silence. The probe is a question or statement which encourages group members to add to or elaborate on something that was said. Below are examples of probes:

- Please tell me more about that.
- Please explain your idea further.
- Can you provide another example?
- Please say more, I'm not sure I understand.

As a general rule, the moderator should interrupt participants as little as possible. If you feel that you need to follow-up using a probe, make a mental note of it and ask them about it when they have finished their thought.

As participants speak, effective moderators also use active listening techniques such as looking at the speaker directly, nodding occasionally, smiling, and encouraging the speaker to continue with short verbal comments like “yes” and “go on,” to let participants know their contributions are welcome and appreciated. It is important, however, not to communicate a judgement of the participant’s contribution by using words like “correct” or “good.”

### **Collecting and Analyzing the Data**

Focus groups should be recorded and transcribed. There may be one or two note takers in addition to the moderator to ensure all responses are being recorded in preparation for data analysis. In addition, a data analysis team should be selected comprised of teachers and education support professionals selected by the local association. The team may also include school and district administrators as well as students and parents. However, it is important to note that any data the students or parents are given must be free of any information that could identify a specific staff person or student.

Once the data team is organized and the focus group recordings are transcribed the team is ready for data analysis. First, a note taker should be appointed and the transcriptions made available to all team members. The team can then begin making observations using the following steps:

1. First, concentrate on making objective observations about what is in the data. Do not attempt to make judgments about why the data may appear as they do.
2. Using the data, take turns making factual observations about what the data say. The note taker will record the observations on the chart paper.
3. When expressing your observation, you might use sentence starters such as: “I see...,” “I observe...,” and “I notice...” Stay away from making inferences. Discuss only the facts at this stage of the process. It is okay to make observations that are based on the observations made by other team members. Think about the trends and patterns that may be evident in the data. The note taker will record the observations on the chart paper.

After the data team has completed the observation process they can move on to making inferences using the following steps:

1. Next, the team will work to make meaning from the data and the observations made. Remember that any inferences the team makes need to be based on the data.
2. When all observations have been made, review them as a team. Code or group the observations into categories of findings. Think about the following questions while organizing the observations:
  - What trends, patterns, or themes do you see in the observations?
  - What assumptions might have motivated your observations?
  - What surprised you (both positive and negative)?

3. As a team, review the categorized findings. Make a list of what the team can now infer about the data. The note taker should record the list on chart paper. The inferences made by the team will help clearly identify the direction for further inquiry.

When the data team has completed making inferences they can move on to asking clarifying questions or drawing tentative conclusions using the following steps:

1. Brainstorm questions that arise from the observations and inferences the team has made about the data. Record these questions on chart paper.
2. From this group of questions, identify the questions that must be answered before any tentative conclusions about the priority issue and focusing questions can be made. Record them on a new sheet of chart paper, leaving room next to each question to record more information.
3. The clarifying questions the team has identified may be answered using the data already collected or the team might need to collect additional data. For each of the clarifying questions, brainstorm the data needed next to each question on the chart paper.
4. The data analysis process is iterative. Repeat the steps of this protocol to analyze any newly collected data. Repeat the data analysis process until the team is confident that it can draw a tentative conclusion from its observations and inferences.

Once the data analysis process is complete, it is recommended that this information be shared with all appropriate stakeholders who are encouraged to ask additional questions or suggest additional data that the team should collect.

### **Example Focus Group Questions for Teachers and Education Support Professionals**

- *Introduction and Guidelines*
  - The moderators should welcome participants and introduce themselves. In addition, the goal of the focus group and basic guidelines for participation should be explained.
  - For example, “the goal of tonight’s focus group is to discuss your views of our local student discipline policies. Your feedback during this focus group will help us develop appropriate and meaningful local policies.”
  - “In order to facilitate the focus group, we have identified the following guidelines. First, one person should speak at a time. Second, there are no ‘wrong’ answers. We are interested in hearing your ideas. Third, we value your confidentiality and will not associate any feedback that comes out of this focus group with a particular individual. Fourth, everyone will have an opportunity to speak. If you have not had an opportunity, I may call on you; and finally, please turn off or silence your cell phones. Are there any additional guidelines that the group would like to add?”

- “In addition, a note-taker is present to ensure we document all of your ideas. The note-taker will not associate comments with names. To facilitate the discussion, we have also created a ‘parking lot’ where we can write ideas that are important but may not be related to the purpose of this focus group. We want to capture those important ideas, but also want to keep the focus on the purpose of our discussion. These ideas will be shared with appropriate individuals following the focus group.”
- “The results of this focus group will be summarized, and you will receive a summary by the end of the week. If we missed any important ideas you raised during this discussion, please let us know.”
- *Focus Group Questions*
  - The moderator should then transition to the focus group questions. For example, “Next, I would like to go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves. Please share your name and your current role in the district.”
  - How has student discipline changed, if at all, since you began working in this district?
  - In your opinion, which approaches to student discipline are most effective?
    - What specifically makes these approaches to student discipline most effective?
  - What are you hearing about student discipline from other colleagues? What are you hearing from parents? What are you hearing from students?
  - In your opinion, what are some examples of local student discipline policies that have been effective?
    - How have they been effective?
  - In your opinion, what are some examples of local student discipline policies that you have found to be ineffective?
    - How could they be changed to be more effective?
  - Do you see any current gaps in our local student discipline policies that the district should address?
    - How should those gaps should be addressed?
  - What new policies or practices (e.g., restorative practices) you would like to see the district implement?
  - What professional development would help improve your knowledge and skills concerning student discipline today?

- *Ending Question*
  - Are there any other suggestions or ideas you would like to share?

### **Example Focus Group Questions for Students**

- *Introduction and Guidelines*
  - The moderators should welcome participants and introduce themselves. In addition, the goal of the focus group and basic guidelines for participation should be explained.
  - For example, “the goal of tonight’s focus group is to discuss your views of our local student discipline policies. Your feedback during this focus group will help us develop appropriate and meaningful local policies.”
  - “In order to facilitate the focus group, we have identified the following guidelines. First, one person should speak at a time. Second, there are no ‘wrong’ answers. We are interested in hearing your ideas. Third, we value your confidentiality and will not associate any feedback that comes out of this focus group with a particular individual. Fourth, everyone will have an opportunity to speak. If you have not had an opportunity, I may call on you; and finally, please turn off or silence your cell phones. Are there any additional guidelines that the group would like to add?”
  - “In addition, a note-taker is present to ensure we document all of your ideas. The note-taker will not associate comments with names. To facilitate the discussion, we have also created a ‘parking lot’ where we can write ideas that are important but may not be related to the purpose of this focus group. We want to capture those important ideas, but also want to keep the focus on the purpose of our discussion. These ideas will be shared with appropriate individuals following the focus group.”
  - “The results of this focus group will be summarized, and you will receive a summary by the end of the week. If we missed any important ideas you raised during this discussion, please let us know.”
- *Focus Group Questions*
  - The moderator should then transition to the focus group questions. For example, “Next, I would like to go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves. Please share your name, your grade level, and the school you attend.”
  - What are some examples of students breaking the rules at school?

- What rules and/or student discipline policies do you think are fair?
  - Why do you think they are fair?
- What rules and/or student discipline policies do you think are unfair?
  - How could these rules or policies be improved?
- Do you think all students are held to the same standard when it comes to the enforcement of the rules and/or student discipline policies?
  - Please share an example?
- What are you hearing about the rules and/or student discipline policies from other students? What are you hearing from your parents or other community members?
- What new policies or practices you would like to see the district implement?
- How could school staff best communicate with you about changes to rules and/or student discipline policies?
- *Ending Question*
  - Are there any other suggestions or ideas you would like to share?

Please contact [IEA Teaching and Learning](#) with any questions.