

Focus groups provide opportunities for students to share their thoughts about school. Successful focus groups are planned, organized, and well thought out. Leaders should reflect on what they want to learn from students and what they will do with student responses. For K-grade 2, focus groups should be comprised of three to four students who naturally get along with each other. We suggest only combining students from different grades if they already know each other. In general, younger students want to please their classroom teacher and therefore may not fully share their honest opinions with that teacher. It is more effective to have another trusted adult (e.g., someone who teaches a different grade level) engage students in these conversations.

GUIDELINES

- ✓ Have two adults conduct the focus group. One asks questions, while the other observes and takes notes.
- ✓ Ensure the setting is comfortable and nonthreatening for all students.
- ✓ Let students know when they arrive that you are excited to hear their ideas. (Also reassure students that they are not in trouble!)
- ✓ Ask open-ended questions that will be easily understood by the students.
- ✓ Aim for a few in-depth conversations and exchange of ideas.
- ✓ Encourage students to share stories and examples.
- ✓ Avoid overwhelming students with too many questions.
- ✓ Remember not to insert your opinions and explanations.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Self-Worth: Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment

To better understand K-grade 2 perceptions of Self-Worth, questions should elicit responses about friends, how people treat each other, what students feel is important to learn at school, and what accomplishments make them proud. Keep in mind that kindergarteners might need more specific questions as well as examples to get started, whereas second graders readily tell stories and elaborate on their responses.

- Tell me how students treat each other at our school. How are they kind (or not) to each other? Give me an example of a time when you helped another student.
- What does it mean to show respect? How do students show respect for teachers?
- How do you know that your teacher likes you? Give me an example.
- What could your teacher do to make school better for you?
- What do you think you are good at in school? What makes you proud? Give me an example of a time you tried really hard at school.
- Tell me about a time you felt special or important at school.

Engagement: Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure

To better understand student perceptions of Engagement, questions should elicit responses regarding what students are excited to learn about, students' level of comfort in asking questions, and opportunities students have to imagine, dream, and create. Questions should also be asked to understand students' thoughts about making mistakes and learning from their mistakes.

- What is fun for you at school? When is school boring? Why?
- How do you use your imagination at school? Give me an example.
- What do you do when you don't understand something at school?
- What happens if you make a mistake on schoolwork? How do you feel about mistakes?
- Do you like projects that involve art? Music? Why or why not?
- Tell me about an activity that you really enjoyed at school. Why did you enjoy it?

Purpose: Leadership & Responsibility, Confidence to Take Action

To better understand student perceptions of Purpose, questions should elicit responses about how students are leaders at school, when they are encouraged to make decisions, and their overall confidence in themselves.

- How are you a leader at school? Give me an example.
- Can you share an example of a decision you made at school?
- What would you like to learn by the end of the school year?
- Can you share an example of students working together to solve a problem?
- How do your actions affect others? Give me an example of a time you did something helpful for another student.
- Tell me about a student who is a leader at school. What makes this student a leader?

Student Voice

To better understand students' experiences with voice, questions should elicit responses about how students are encouraged to use their voices, listen to others, and work together.

- If you have a great idea at school, how do you share it?
- What does it mean to be responsible for what you say?
- What does it mean to have an opinion? What is your opinion about school?
- What makes someone a good listener? Give me an example of a time you were a good listener.
- What does it mean to have a kind, respectful voice?
- Tell me about a time you worked with a teacher to solve a problem.

Next Steps

Once focus groups are completed, the next step is to identify patterns or themes in the students' responses. For example, a theme might be that students feel their peers are very helpful or that students do not know how to share their ideas in class. When reviewing focus group responses, look for trends. What was repeatedly said by multiple students? It is important to realize that one loud passionate student does not represent the views of all the students. While this student's ideas should not be dismissed, these ideas alone are not a theme. Once the themes are identified, they should be shared with students and teachers. Action plans should then be developed to address areas in need of change and to celebrate and maintain identified strengths. This process should be viewed as dynamic and ongoing. Never stop seeking student input, ideas, and opinions.