

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. Ideally, two adults should be present during focus groups so one can ask questions and the other can take notes. Focus groups provide an opportunity to understand the “why” and “what” behind survey responses. Why do students feel proud of their school? What type of leadership opportunities do students have in the classroom? Focus groups are intended to be a guided discussion where the participants do most of the talking. Students are encouraged to provide their honest opinions and insights around specific issues. Facilitators should seek to understand participants and their unique perspectives.

Keep in mind that Quaglia Student Voice focus groups differ from the Quaglia Student Voice surveys in important ways:

Focus Group

Insights
Confidential, but personal
Homogeneous group
Flexible
Unrestricted answers
Results in words

Survey

Data
Anonymous
Heterogeneous
Standardized
Restricted to Likert Scale
Results in numbers

GUIDELINES

- ✓ Have two adults conduct the focus group. One asks questions, while the other observes and takes notes.
- ✓ Gather a diverse group of six to eight students. It is best to have students from the same grade level participate in a session together. For example, one focus group comprised of all sophomores, one of all third graders, etc.
- ✓ Selection of the focus group participants should be as random as possible. The more representative the group is of the general school population, the better feedback you will receive.
- ✓ 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!)
- ✓ Aim for a few in-depth conversations and exchange of ideas.
- ✓ Encourage students to share stories and examples without using names (e.g., “One time I saw a student ...”).
- ✓ Avoid overwhelming students with too many questions.
- ✓ Remember not to insert your opinions and explanations.

QUESTIONS

- Make sure questions are open-ended. For example, “What does it mean to feel welcome at our school?”
- Arrange the sequence of questions from general to specific within each topic. For example, start with, “How important is effort to being successful?” Then you may ask, “What specifically does our school do to reward students’ effort?”
- Design questions that prompt thoughtful conversations rather than yes/no responses. For example, ask “What does it mean to be bullied?” and “In what ways is bullying an issue at our school?” rather than “Are kids bullied at our school?”
- At the very end, ask all students the following final question: If you had a magic wand and could change one thing to make the experience at our school better for all students, what would it be?

THE SESSION

Assure the participants of confidentiality. Let students know that you will share what they say but not who said it. Confirm that participants understand this, providing examples as needed.

Be cautious not to lead participants in a particular direction or to react to their responses (e.g. do not act surprised, hurt, disappointed, etc.). Be aware of your own biases. Are you focusing on what you want to hear, as compared to what the participants are really saying?

After a question is asked, listen not only for content, but for emotions, paradoxes, contradictions, and discomfort. This will help you learn or confirm not merely the data (available in the survey), but the meaning behind the data. The results of a focus group should provide further insight into the information you already have from the survey.

The conversations among participants should result in a picture of combined perspectives. The interviewers should strive to see how the information “all fits together.” Do not conclude that one student’s agreement with another is that student’s final word on that matter. Probe students who agree with another’s comments for their particular point of view.

The goal of focus groups is to produce meaningful conversations about the topics you are discussing, rather than a series of short answers. You want participants to “color in” the black and white sketch provided by the survey. Good conversations include laughter (humor is important to pay attention to), personal (not private) stories, connections to things that were said earlier, disagreement, contradiction, interruption, and silences (these can be important to notice, as well). With that said, balance the needs of participants to have input with the need to stay focused.

Keep in mind that, unlike the survey, the interviewers now share control of the process with the individuals being interviewed. Feel free to take advantage of the spontaneous and surprising moments. Encourage spontaneity and watch how participants respond. Be sure to observe body language. As long as the conversation is on track and you are learning (not just rehashing something), pursue the line of conversation. Ask follow up questions. You may learn something that you can then use in a subsequent session.

DIRECTIONS FOR STUDENTS

- First of all, you are probably wondering why you are here today:

You are here because a while back, you took a survey that asked questions about how you feel about your school, your teachers, your classmates and your learning. We looked at the results of the survey and want to know more about what you and your classmates were thinking when you chose your answers. Today, we are listening to you and your thoughts about your school experiences.

- The ground rules for sharing in this group:

Since we really want you to feel like you can be honest and open with us, we have some ground rules for our discussion.

- Everyone's viewpoint is important to us. Everyone needs a chance to talk. If you have something to share, please share. You do have the right to pass. If you then want to comment on something someone else shares, please wait until they have finished and then add to the conversation.
 - Confidentiality is a must. What is said here, stays here. No sharing once you leave this room.
 - No names are to be used. Feel free to talk about the way an event or situation makes/made you feel, but do not give names.
 - Everything that is being said here in response to the questions is going to be recorded. The reason for this is so that we can look for trends in what you are saying so we can work on making improvements at our school. No names or identifying marks will be associated with your comments.
 - Once all the focus groups are finished, teams of people will be looking at the responses and finding trends that we can work on together to improve our school and how you feel about what is going on here. Various teams (students; teachers; and students and teachers together) will work to develop plans to improve the experiences students have at our school. We will let all students know that the plans were created because we listened. We want all students to know that their voices are heard at our school.
- At the very end, we will ask a final question for you to answer that will allow you to imagine and dream.
 - Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

ANALYZING AND SHARING RESULTS

When analyzing the results of focus groups, look for *patterns* in the conversations. What themes emerged, both positive and negative? What particular perspectives were evident? Did males answer differently than females? Did the 11th graders in your school have a different point of view on an issue than 9th graders?

Do not report the results of focus groups by percentage (e.g., 75% of the males we talked to said that most bullying happened in the locker room). Instead, report that “a common theme among the boys regarding bullying was that it typically took place in the locker room. Several boys mentioned that they had witnessed incidents after gym class that they considered bullying.”

When the particular way a student has said something captures or highlights a theme, include the exact statement in the report (e.g., One boy said, “I saw some older guys kick a younger kid and no one did anything to stop it.”)

Be sure to report what you, as an interviewer, learned. What insights did the conversations provide for you? What previous judgments were confirmed or called into question? Also include follow-up questions you believe should be discussed further. Share your findings with the appropriate audience. Use the information gathered during focus groups, in conjunction with the Quaglia Student Voice survey results, to inform your next steps. Create an action plan focused on improving areas of weakness, as well as celebrating and maintaining identified strengths at your school. This process should be viewed as dynamic and ongoing. Never stop seeking student input, ideas, and opinions.

FOCUS GROUP PLANNING CHECKLIST

Preparation

- ☐ The purpose of the focus group is clear.
- ☐ Two people have agreed to lead each session: one asking questions, one taking notes.
- ☐ Focus group questions have been prepared (How, What, Why, Explain, Tell me more about...).
- ☐ An introduction has been prepared for the participants. The message includes the purpose of the session, the difference between confidential and anonymous, and how data will be analyzed and acted upon.
- ☐ Randomized groups of students have been chosen.
- ☐ If required by the district, permission forms have been obtained.
- ☐ A time has been established for the leaders to analyze results after the focus group.
- ☐ Students will be excited to participate—share your enthusiasm and appreciation!

Remember Best Practices

- ☐ Check your biases. Make sure leaders are not trying to find insights into their own interests; instead, let the established questions guide the focus group.
- ☐ Talk less, listen more.
- ☐ Never force anyone to answer a question and always provide the opportunity for students to send a written response at a later time.
- ☐ Keep the over-talkers in check.
- ☐ Ask follow-up questions and request anonymous examples.
- ☐ Do not volunteer examples students may have forgotten to share (e.g. “Don’t you recall when the principal did this or that...”).
- ☐ Pay attention to what students do not say or have no responses to.
- ☐ Enjoy the experience. The first few rounds of focus groups are a learning experience and not a scientific study!

Close the Loop!

- ☐ Read the focus group notes and look for themes. Suggestion: Use a highlighter to mark each emerging theme with a different color.
- ☐ Be cautious that themes from louder voices do not overshadow other themes.
- ☐ The feedback loop must be closed! In a timely manner, share and discuss learnings with students and staff.
- ☐ Use the findings to inform action plans. Remember to involve students.
- ☐ Handwritten thank you notes are rare and appreciated. Send a thank you to students!

For Consideration:

Think ahead to your next focus group and its purpose. Ensure that a variety of adults have opportunities to co-lead focus groups, matching experienced leaders with new leaders. Most teachers and administrators find this process extremely insightful and rewarding. At the high school level, teachers often partner with a student to lead focus groups.