Conducting Parent and Caregiver Focus Groups

Purpose

Schools can use focus groups to gather qualitative data to help understand parent and caregiver perspectives. Focus groups are helpful for explaining and expanding the results of survey data. They also are inexpensive and quick.

Choosing Participants

For the best results, focus group participants should represent all disaggregated groups in the school and each group should be represented by more than one participant. When a deeper understanding of one group is desired, such as families of exceptional students, a focus group of members from that group can be convened by itself. Before the event, determine if any participants will need a translator to fully understand and contribute to the discussion. Each focus group should have six to 12 parents or caregivers, no administrators or staff. Participants share their ideas and opinions more freely if school personnel are not present.

During focus groups, parents and caregivers can build on and reflect on each others' responses. It is important not to let any participants dominate the discussion. If discussion strays from the topic, facilitators should gently guide the discussion back to the topic, reminding participants of the purpose of the group. It is important that facilitators are neutral and do not share their own opinions. Facilitators can use reflection to clarify what they hear from participants, but should refrain from speaking too much.

Preparing the focus group participants

Arrange the group in a circle of chairs, with or without a table. Provide nametags and begin with introductions. Welcome all of the participants to the focus group and let them know that the ideas and opinions they share will help the district or school do a better job serving their students. Let the parents and caregivers know that you would like them to share their ideas, personal experiences with the school, as well as their child's experiences in school.

Explain that you would like to learn about certain topics today, so you will be asking questions and keeping the discussion on track. If parents or caregivers have other topics they would like to discuss, set up a time to talk with them once the focus group is over or at a later time. While focus groups do not provide confidentiality, the group facilitator can suggest that the group treat each other's comments with respect, valuing differences of opinion.

Recording Participant Responses

Recording participants' responses is important. Have a note-taker who is not involved in facilitating the group. In addition, recording responses on a flip chart can help focus the discussion and give the facilitator a way to make sure he or she has understood the participants correctly.

Parent Focus Group Questions

The Ohio Department of Education's (ODE's) *Decision Framework, Level III C* requires districts to measure parent and caregiver perspectives on three areas of the school. By using three topic areas, districts can gather data on a number of topics. They are:

- Group 1 – Opportunities for Parent and Caregiver Participation;
- Group 2 – Parent and Caregiver Perceptions; and
- Group 3 – Communication.

ODE has developed a set of questions to guide each group's discussion. The district can conduct the group discussions simultaneously in different rooms, or at different times and in different spaces.

If a large group of parents and caregivers meet in one location, they can divide into smaller groups based on their interests. Each smaller group can meet in a different room. The group leaders should make sure that there are a large enough number of participants for each group.

ODE developed the questions that follow to encourage conversation and gather feedback from parents and caregivers to help schools measure the degree of effectiveness for Level IIIC of the Decision Framework. It is not necessary to use all of the questions. Facilitators should choose the questions that will work best for the group. Also, facilitators should feel free to rephrase questions so that they are understandable to the group.

Focus Group I: Opportunities for Parent and Caregiver Participation

The following questions are designed to gather feedback to inform districts and schools on the following Decision Framework, Level IIIC Indicators: 169, 174, 175 and 178.

Area 1: Parent Participation and Perception

Indicator 169: *Providing activities designed to share information of their child's academic progress and performance (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, automated progress reports/updates, automated home notices/hotline)*

Question 1: "Our district (school) shares information with families about their child's or teenager's progress in several ways, including _____ (insert current practices for keeping families informed (i.e., parent-teacher conferences, automated home notice/hotline, electronic grade books). What practices have been most helpful to you, and why?"

Question 2: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall, how would you rate this school (district) on sharing students' progress with families?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Area 2: Communication

Indicator 174: *Provide information to build families' knowledge and skills in supporting their child's learning at home and their child's academic progress at school*

Question 3: "How has your child's or teenager's school (teachers) provided information to help you know how to support your child's learning at home and school?" "How have you used this information?" Encourage participants to give examples from their experiences of helping their children.

Question 4: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall, how would you rate this school (district) on building families' knowledge and skill in supporting their child's learning at home and their child's academic progress at school?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Indicator 175: *Provide training to build families' knowledge and skills in supporting their child's learning at home and their child's academic progress at school*

Question 5: "Has your child's or teenager's school (teachers) shown you how you can help your child learn at home?" Prompts: "How have they done this?" "How have you used this information?"

Question 6: "Is there any topic on which you would like the school to offer training for yourself or others to improve how parents and caregivers support their child's learning at home or school?"

Question 7: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall, how would you rate this school (district) on offering training to families on how to support their child's learning at home and their child's academic progress at school?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Indicator 178: *Provides for a range of meaningful family activities that reflect the specific needs and characteristics of students' families*

Question 8: "What family activities does your school (district) provide that are a good fit for your family's needs and interests?" Encourage participants to share specific examples.

Question 9: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall, how would you rate this school (district) on providing a range of meaningful activities that reflect the needs and characteristics of the families of our students?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Focus Group 2: Parent and Caregiver Perceptions

The following questions are designed to gather feedback to inform districts and schools on the following Decision Framework, Level IIIC indicators: 170, 171, 172 and 173.

Area 1: Parent Participation and Perception

Indicator 170: *Ensuring all parents - considering gender and disaggregated groups – generally believe that the district focuses on positive outcomes for all students*

Question 1: "What evidence have you seen of this district (building) preparing children or teenagers for a successful future?"

Question 2: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall, how would you rate this school (district) on preparing all students for successful futures?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Indicator 171: *Ensuring all parents – considering gender and disaggregated groups – generally believe that the district provides a safe environment for learning*

Question 3: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall, how would you rate this school (district) on students' safety?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Question 4: "How can the safety of our students be improved?"

Indicator 172: *Ensuring all parents – considering gender and disaggregated groups – generally believe that the district demonstrates sensitivity to the needs of children with academic or behavioral difficulty*

Question 5: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall, how well do you feel this district (building) meets the needs of students who have learning or behavior difficulties?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Question 6: How can this district (building) improve how we meet the needs of students facing learning or behavior difficulties?"

Indicator 173: *Identify and monitor the number and percentage of parents – considering gender and disaggregated groups – who generally believe that the district provides a challenging curriculum to help students meet their maximum potential*

Question 7: "What evidence have you seen that this school (district) is providing your child with a challenging curriculum?"

Question 8: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall how would you rate the effectiveness of the school's curriculum for helping students meet their maximum potential?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Question 9: *What are your suggestions on how the curriculum or programs in the school could be improved to better prepare students for their future?*

Focus Group 3: Communication

The following questions are designed to elicit feedback to inform districts on the Decision Framework, Level IIIC indicators 176 and 177.

Area 2: Communication

Indicator 176: *Implement a system of two-way communication for families using language that is clear and that fosters family participation*

Question 1: "How effective is the school's communication? Do you feel you get all of the information you need when you need it?"

Question 2: "How well does your school (teacher, principal) listen to you? How does your school (teacher or principal) invite you to share your ideas?"

Question 3: "What could be done at your school to improve communication from school to home, or home to school, about student progress and other topics?"

Question 4: Ask the participants the following question. After reading the question, read the four responses. Ask the participants to raise their hand for the response that most closely matches how they feel. Record the number of participants that chose each response on a flip chart. Then follow-up by asking the participants to explain why they chose their response. Encourage participants to share specific examples.

"Overall, how would you rate this school (district) on communication with families?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement

Indicator 177: *Ensure that communication is in the primary language of the parent or caregiver*

Question 5: "Into what other languages would you like your school to translate meetings or written communication?"

Question 6: "How easy is it to understand the information you receive from your child's school?"
"Overall, how would you rate this school (district) on communication with families?" Choose from one of these four levels.

1. Wow – Beyond your expectations
2. Good – Meets Expectations
3. Caution – Below expectations
4. Urgent – Needs immediate improvement