

# Tools FOR SCHOOLS

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## Focus groups zoom in close on school district's concerns

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**I**magine this scenario: The Laredo School District ends school at 1 p.m. every Wednesday to provide time for teachers to work with colleagues during their work day. Although parents initially supported the idea, after a few months' experience with the new schedule, the district begins to hear many parent complaints. In tight budget times, parents question whether this is a wise use of public dollars.

Teachers, too, are grumbling about the reduced time they have with students. Even the administrators who promoted the idea are beginning to have second thoughts about the use of the time.

How do the district leaders learn more

about the effectiveness of the new schedule? How do they identify the real concerns that each group is expressing about it?

Focus groups are an increasingly popular option for school districts that want to uncover concerns of various groups when such situations occur.

But what is a focus group?

Focus groups are not just small group conversations but a process for collecting qualitative, not quantitative information, said Kathy Leslie, a consultant with KSA-Plus in Arlington, Va.

A focus group is a "structured conversation that's intended to get people's opinions on given topics," said Kris Kurtenbach, partner in Collaborative Communications Group in Washington, D.C.

A focus group is "a heterogeneous group that may have different viewpoints. In fact, you want them to have different viewpoints — who come together for a carefully planned discussion intended to

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**Our goal: All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.**

## Focus groups

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obtain their perspectives on a defined area of interest in an environment that is permissive, nonthreatening, and safe,” Leslie said. For example, in the Laredo School scenario, a focus group might be composed of parents of students but those parents may have different perspectives on the change in the school schedule.

If a district wants quantitative information – for example, how many people support a change in the school calendar — a survey will do a better job of producing that information. If a district wants information about why families favor one school calendar over another, focus groups would be a better research tool.

“A survey is going to give you potentially very narrow input on a lot of topics. It’s more superficial. A focus group is more of a discussion. You’re having a deeper-level conversation,” Kurtenbach said.

But surveys and focus groups can be used in tandem with each other. “You may get signals from a survey that tell you which areas to probe further in a focus group,” Leslie said.

Once a focus group has been identified as the best way to collect information, there are several steps to follow to create a successful focus group:

### **1. Write a “planning” or “purpose” statement that expresses the questions to which the school or district is seeking an answer.**

A planning statement for the school schedule example might read: “To gain understanding of teachers’ and parents’ experiences with the new school schedule and to explore ways to improve the use of time for professional learning.”

A planning statement ensures that the facilitator and district leaders agree on what information the focus group will collect — and not collect. For example, a disconnect would be clear if the planning statement indicated the focus group would determine how many teachers and parents supported the new schedule. For that information, a survey might be more appropriate.

As the planning statement is being written, identify other features of the process. For example, Leslie said she always wants focus group participants to receive a summary of the

discussion. She ensures in advance that her clients understand that expectation.

### **2. Identify the facilitator.**

Hiring a third party to run focus groups makes sense most of the time, Kurtenbach said. The ideal facilitator is a good strategic questioner and able to quickly put people at ease and build a rapport so there’s a level of trust and candor, she said.

A focus group facilitator is not simply doing a group interview. “The facilitator is asking questions designed to get people to talk in such a way that the facilitator can observe what moves them to a different point of view. The facilitator is really looking for the triggers that indicate what makes people change their minds about a given topic,” Leslie said.

But Leslie said a professional facilitator can sometimes be the wrong person for the job. For example, if the focus group is gathering perceptions of a disenfranchised group regarding the high school redesign, having a member of that group as facilitator would be more beneficial than hiring an outside party, Leslie said.

Leslie said she often trains parents to run focus groups when the topics concern disenfranchised groups. When that is the situation, she is the trainer in the background who sets up the process and provides guidance on group dynamics and meeting structure. “You want participants to be comfortable. The more comfortable and safe they feel, the richer the information in the discussions,” Leslie said.

### **3. Identify focus group participants.**

The key in selecting participants is to keep each focus group homogeneous in terms of the broad group they represent. “In focus groups, you want a safe environment in which people feel they can express their points of view,” Leslie said. That means creating groups according to shared characteristics: teachers, parents, racial or ethnic groups, business folks, senior citizens.

Avoid mixing individuals who have obvious power relationships or predictably different viewpoints. Do not, for example, mix teachers and students in the same focus group.

Don’t worry about ensuring that every viewpoint is represented. Instead, strive for a

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## Focus groups

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random selection within the category, Leslie said.

If an individual has been extremely vocal and public on the subject, including them in the focus group may not be wise because of the likelihood that they could distort the group's discussion, Leslie said.

### 4. Recruit participants.

Getting participants to the focus group is the biggest challenge. Since most focus groups should have eight to 12 participants, invite at least 24 in order to get the desired group size.

"Eight to 12 is ideal so that you can make eye contact with them, have more of a personal conversation, and track their non-verbal expressions in addition to what they say," Kurtenbach said.

Send a written invitation with a RSVP. (*See Page 7 for an example.*) Making follow-up phone calls to confirm attendance is essential, Leslie said. "It's very labor intensive. With some groups, I call first, send a letter, and call again," Leslie said. "You may have to provide transportation, child care, and food at the meeting plus an incentive."

### 5. Select a location and times for the focus groups.

When choosing times and locations, look for neutral locations large enough to fit everyone comfortably, accessible by public transportation

(if that is an issue in your community), and at times convenient for participants.

Consider community centers, libraries, and religious facilities which will often make rooms available for school-related focus groups at no charge. They also offer the convenience of parking lots and a sense of neutrality.

### 6. Keep a record of the discussion.

Don't expect the facilitator to take notes. That person needs to stay focused on moving the discussion along. Instead, before the meeting, recruit a notetaker and plan to use a tape recorder. A tape recorder can be unobtrusive and still allow the facilitator to get exact statements. "Using exact quotes is very powerful when you write your report," Leslie said. "But I always ask if it's OK to tape. Some have asked me to turn it off and you have to comply with that."

Videotaping a focus group is a great option in school districts that have their own facilities.

### 7. Analyze what you've learned.

The facilitator is responsible for writing a summary of each focus group and, if there are multiple groups, for synthesizing the information into a final report.

Agree in advance about the deadline for this report and who will see the final product. Leslie said she tries to ensure that focus group participants see the completed report.



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## resources / focus groups

### Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research

Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey. Sage, 2000.

Includes ideas for budgeting for a focus group and how to use software to code and analyze focus group results. Includes vignettes to illustrate problems and effective ways to resolve them and suggestions for designing questions and then how to refine them based on responses. Order at [www.sagepub.com](http://www.sagepub.com). Price: \$46.95, paperback.

### Developing Questions for Focus Groups

Richard A. Krueger. Sage, 1997.

Describes a process for identifying powerful themes and translating those themes into questions. Suggests ways to categorize, phrase, and sequence focus group questions, and for involving focus group participants. Order at [www.sagepub.com](http://www.sagepub.com). Price: \$38.95, paperback.

*Continued on p. 8*

# 11 questions to ask before you launch a research project

1. What do you want to know?

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2. Why do you want to know it?

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3. Who will use the information?

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4. What is the best way to get this data? Why?

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5. If you decide on a survey, who will you survey?

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6. Who will write the questions?

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7. Who will do the interviewing or facilitation?

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8. How will the results be compiled?

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9. How will the results be used?

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10. When will the results be needed?

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11. How will the results be communicated?

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**Source:** Kathy Leslie, KSA-Plus Communications.

**TIP**  
Questions should be open-ended. Those that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” should be avoided.

**Source:** *What are focus groups?* By the Section on Survey Research Methods of the American Statistical Association. Can be downloaded free of charge from [www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf](http://www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf)

# Sample focus group schedule

## ■ Moderator introduction

### ■ Thank you and purpose (1 minute)

Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'd like to start off by thanking each of you for taking time to come today. We'll be here for about an hour and a half.

The reason we're here today is to get your opinions and attitudes about issues related to Laredo Elementary School.

I'm going to lead our discussion today. I am not here to convince you of anything or try to sway your opinion. My job is just to ask you questions and then encourage and moderate our discussion.

I also would like to introduce [name of recorder]. [He or she] will be recording our discussion today for my report.

### ■ Ground rules (2 minutes)

To allow our conversation to flow more freely, I'd like to go over some ground rules.

1. Only one person speaks at a time.
2. Please avoid side conversations.
3. Everyone doesn't have to answer every single question, but I'd like to hear from each of you today as the discussion progresses.
4. This is a confidential discussion in that I will not report your names or who said what to the school district. Names of participants will not even be included in the final report about this meeting. It also means that, except for the report that will be written, what is said in this room stays in this room. When you walk out of here, what you remember the most is what you should not be talking about.
5. We stress confidentiality because we want an open discussion. We want all of you to feel free to comment on each other's remarks without fear that your comments will be repeated later and possibly taken out of context.
6. Talking about specific people is inappropriate.
7. There are no "wrong answers," just different opinions. Say what is true for you, even if you're the only one who feels that way. Don't let the group sway you. But if you do change your mind, just let me know.
8. Let me know if you need a break. The bathrooms are [location].

### ■ Introduction of participants (10 minutes)

Before we start, I'd like to know a little about each of you. Please tell me:

- Your name
- How long you have lived in this area
- If you have school-age children and if you have children at Laredo school.
- What kind of work you do

### ■ General questions (10 minutes)

Draft four or five general questions to give everyone the opportunity to weigh in on something that is non-threatening and only loosely related to the topic.

- What's your general feeling about the school?
- How successful are the students from your school?

### ■ Specific questions (30 minutes)

All parents are concerned about ensuring that their children have the best education possible.

- Could you please tell me what schools and teachers should do in order to be certain that all children are able to achieve at the fullest potential?

Last year, the school district decided to redesign the school day in order to provide time for teachers to work together.

- What has been your experience with this new schedule?
- What concerns have you had about it?
- What have you liked about it?
- What should the school district consider as it decides whether to move forward with this plan?

### ■ Closing question (10 minutes)

If your job was to advise the school district's leaders, what advice would you give them on their plans?

### ■ Closing (2 minutes)

Thanks for coming today and talking about Laredo school. Your comments have given me lots of different ways to see this issue. I thank you for your time.

## TIP

**"At the beginning, when I'm talking about the ground rules, I tell them that I want them to feel free to speak their opinions but that they should move on. I say, 'If you're not doing that, I will stare hard at you and let you know that you should let someone else speak. So if you notice that I'm staring at you, that's why!'"**

—Kathy Leslie

KSA-Plus

Communications

**Source:** Adapted from *Conducting Focus Groups*, by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Available for free download at [www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/focusgroups.PDF](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/focusgroups.PDF)

## Facilitator dos and don'ts

### TIP

**“When selecting facilitators, look for someone with a certain skill set.**

**Facilitators have to be able to manage a conversation. That includes having the ability to cut somebody off when one of the participants has said enough.”**

— Kris Kurtenbach  
Collaborative  
Communications  
Group



**Source:** *Conducting Focus Groups*, by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Available for free download at [www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/focusgroups.PDF](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/focusgroups.PDF)

### What a facilitator should do ...

- Make everyone feel welcome.
- Speak in a loud, clear voice.
- Be flexible.
- Include everyone in the discussion.
- Remain neutral during the discussion.
- Leave enough time for people to answer questions (enjoy the silence!).
- Vary your style of asking questions to get a variety of answers.
- Probe for clarity.
- Allow diverse opinions to emerge.
- Thank people for participating.

### What a facilitator shouldn't do ...

- Talk too much.
- Let one person dominate the discussion.
- Ask more than one question at a time.
- Ask “yes” or “no” questions (instead ask open-ended questions).
- Go over the allotted time.

### TIP

**“Sit around a table or place chairs in a circle.**

**I always place myself so I'm an equal with all of the participants.**

**I never put chairs in a traditional classroom style. Never.”**

— Kathy Leslie  
KSA-Plus  
Communications

### Advantages of focus groups

- A wide range of information can be gathered in a relatively short time.
- The facilitator can explore related but unanticipated topics as they arise in the discussion.
- Focus groups do not require complex sampling techniques.

### Disadvantages of focus groups

- The sample is neither randomly selected nor representative of a target population so the results cannot be generalized or treated statistically.
- The skills and motivation of the facilitator influence the quality of the data.
- Focus groups lend themselves to a different kind of analysis than would be carried out with survey results. In surveys, the emphasis is on counting and measuring versus coding/classifying/sorting in a focus group. A focus group analysis is truly qualitative. You use the actual words and behaviors of participants to answer your questions rather than counting responses.

**Source:** *What are focus groups?* By the Section on Survey Research Methods of the American Statistical Association. Can be downloaded free of charge from [www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf](http://www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf)

# Sample invitation letter

Date  
Jane Doe  
1234 Everywhere St.  
Anywhere, USA

Dear Jane,

As a parent of a student at Laredo Elementary School, you know that the school introduced a new schedule this year in order to provide time for teachers to meet with each other in small professional learning groups.

Now that we've lived with our new schedule for a few months, we want to learn more about teachers', parents', and students' experiences with it.

We cordially invite you to join other parents in a focus group to talk about this issue. We want to hear your opinions and ideas in order to create the best school environment possible for our students and our community.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Time \_\_\_\_\_  
Location \_\_\_\_\_

The group will consist of about seven other parents and a moderator.

Thank you for considering being a part of this discussion. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 123-4567.

Sincerely,  
Judy Brown  
Principal

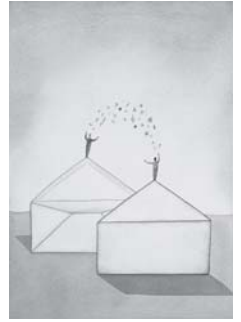
## RSVP

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Best telephone number to contact me: \_\_\_\_\_

- Yes, I can participate in a focus group discussion at \_\_\_\_\_ [time] on \_\_\_\_\_ [date] at \_\_\_\_\_ [location].
- No, I cannot participate in this focus group. Please let me know if other dates and times are available.
- No, I am not interested in participating in any focus group.

*Please return RSVP in the self-addressed, stamped envelope included with this mailing.*



### TIP

**“The first person to speak in a focus group really sets the tone. So, when I begin, I try to get them talking about their day, how was their trip to the place where we’re having the focus group, anything like that so I can get a sense of who are the negative people in the room. I will not start with them. I want to start with someone who has a sense of curiosity or is at least positive. If I start a focus group on a negative tone, they will do nothing but vent. It’s OK to do that as long as they’re being thoughtful, not negative.”**

— Kris Kurtenbach  
Collaborative  
Communications  
Group

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**resources / focus groups**

*Continued from p. 3*

**Moderating Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Group Facilitation**

Thomas L. Greenbaum. Sage, 1999.

Covers the fundamentals of facilitating focus groups, plus advanced techniques such as managing group dynamics, energizing a tired group, and digging deeper into the minds of participants. Offers insights into how to evaluate a facilitator's work. Also includes plenty of advice for anyone who conducts in-depth interviews or group facilitation. Order at [www.sagepub.com](http://www.sagepub.com). Price: \$49.95, paperback.

**Savvy Decision Making: An Administrator's Guide to Using Focus Groups in Schools**

Madhavi Jayanthi and Janet S. Nelson. Corwin, 2001.

Offers practical advice on how to design and run an effective focus group, as well as tips on analyzing and reporting the information that emerges. Includes educational examples, guidelines, and a simple, step-by-step process to guide administrators who want to use focus groups. Order at [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com). Price: \$29.95, paperback.

**The Wilder Non-Profit Field Guide to Conducting Successful Focus Groups**

Judith Sharken Simon. Wilder Foundation, 1999.

Shows how to collect valuable information without a lot of money or special expertise. Includes examples, worksheets, answers to frequently asked questions, and an annotated bibliography. Order at [www.fieldstonealliance.org](http://www.fieldstonealliance.org). Price: \$21.95, paperback.

**"What are Focus Groups?"**

A pamphlet created by the American Statistical Association's Section on Survey Research Methods. Part of ASA's series on What is a Survey. Includes its own list of resources that will take you deeper into public opinion research. Can be downloaded free of charge from [www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf](http://www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf).

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