



## MREL: Teacher Focus Group Protocol

### (5 minutes) INTRODUCTION, including time to get started

1. Overview of the project:
  - Thank you for your willingness to participate in this session.
  - My name is XX and I work for an independent, non-partisan, non-profit research organization, based in New York, called Public Agenda.
  - Have any of you participated in a focus group before?
  - The purpose of these focus groups is to understand, from YOUR perspectives, pressing issues that affect your work.
  - This will help inform the Midwest Regional Educational Lab (MREL) staff in their development of projects, technical assistance, and products to support our region.
  - While we welcome specific recommendations for MREL's work, our main purpose here today is to clarify areas of need.
  
2. Description of how the group will proceed:
  - We will be discussing your state's and district's educational priorities, the challenges you're experiencing and the types of information and support that is helping you to address these challenges.
  - This is a conversation. While I'll be asking questions, please feel free to speak up and address each other.
  - We will be videotaping and recording the conversation so that I don't have to take notes as we're talking. So that the recording is clear, please just speak one at a time.
  
3. Get informed consent for note-taking:
  - All opinions expressed in these focus groups will remain confidential. The reports we produce will not identify individual participants. Public Agenda will not turn over any raw data collected, but will write reports summarizing the major needs in the region.
  - The videotapes will not be made public. The information will be used internally to guide decision making, but may also be used externally as justification for proposals. External reporting will keep people's statements confidential by reporting aggregately that "Focus group participants said...."
  - Any Questions? If you agree to be taped, would you please nod for the camera?

## WARM UP

1. (5 minutes) Tell us your name and a little about yourself, current position, years of experience in education, subjects you teach, etc.
2. (2 minutes) Overall, would you say the public schools in your community are doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job? [SHOW OF HANDS] Why do you say that?
3. (5 minutes) What do you think the goal of education should be?

[PROBE: If the following areas don't emerge naturally.]

- To produce literate, educated citizens who participate in our democracy,
- to prepare young people to continue their education in college, technical, or trade school,
- to prepare good workers who can succeed in the modern economy,
- to teach students to think,
- to teach the students the basics in reading, writing, and math,
- to help students develop strong character

Do you think that all students are better off going to college after they finish high school, or are some better off learning a trade and going straight into the workforce?

## PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES

1. (15 minutes) What would you say are the two or three top educational priorities or needs that require attention in order to improve educational results for your students? Are there any other educational priorities and needs that you'd like comment on? Please be as specific as you can.
2. (10 minutes) How are your students doing in the classroom? Do your students have the background skills required for the coursework you teach?

Do you notice any different in student achievement levels by subject? Is extra emphasis on math, writing and reading crowding out time spent on other subjects you think are important? (e.g. art, music, foreign languages, physical education)

3. (20 minutes) We've just been talking about critical areas requiring attention to improve educational results. What do you see as the major challenges in addressing those areas?

[IF MONEY, PROBE: Are there other significant challenges in addressing those areas besides money?]

For example, we would like to know more about the main challenges you and your school face regarding:

[PROBE: Depending on the group composition, probe on up to five of the following areas, if they don't emerge naturally.]

- Efforts to enhance mastery of core academic outcomes, including reading and writing, mathematics, and science.
- Preparing students for rewarding and constructive careers (from vocational training to College Prep)
- High school reform (i.e. reducing drop out rates, matching curricula to what employers want, more rigorous exit exams)
- Meeting AYP, NCLB standards
- Programs intended to improve behavior, character, and responsibility
- Data collection efforts at the school and district level
- Off campus learning such as Supplemental Educational Services, Distance learning and home schooling
- Closing the achievement gap
- Effective school leadership
- Communicating with administrators so they understand your constraints.
- The relationship between union and district officials
- The way the local community views your school and its students
- Special Needs Populations (i.e., English Language Learners and Special Education) [PROBE FOR: Working with regulations, Money and resource issues, Beliefs of entitlement from parents and students, Teacher staffing, Creating the right enviroined, Interaction between special ed and non special ed students, Issues around mainstreaming]
- Skills needed for the future. Do the schools prepare the students for the future, by adequately preparing them for collegiate work or by giving them specific job and practical life skills? (e.g., study skills needed for college, vocational training, balancing a checkbook)

[PROBES: What are you doing to address these challenges? What is constraining you in your work? Look for clarity and specificity, so we really know what they're talking about when they say things like "closing achievement gaps." Which groups are you most concerned about who are not doing well?

4. (10 minutes) We'd like to hear about your recent experiences and the ways you are solving problems. Over the last four or five years, since NCLB was implemented, how have you been able to work through the different challenges that NCLB has presented?

\*\*\* 10 Minute Break \*\*\*

## INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

5. (15 minutes) Short of supplying additional funds, what forms of support would help you to be more proactive within your agendas? (i.e. with program evaluation)

[If these items don't emerge earlier]

Are there any kinds of training and technical assistance or other forms of support that you would think would be especially helpful to improving student outcomes or meeting the other priorities or needs you just mentioned – things such as:

- Curriculum alignment
- School leadership
- School reforms
- Special populations (e.g., English Language Learners and Special Education students)

6. (5 minutes) Would additional training for you and other teachers be helpful for improving classroom instruction? Would you want professional development to help you in terms of:

- Teaching preparation
- Teaching methods and curriculum aimed at enhancing academic achievement
- Technology as administrative tools, as well as classroom resources

7. (15 minutes) Do you receive support from your principal and department head? Are they responsive when you make requests and listen when you express your needs? Are you in agreement with school leaders as to what will improve educational outcomes at your school?

What are their priorities? Have these priorities changed in recent years? Do they have time to focus on teaching and learning, or are they too busy having to manage parents, resources, and other teachers?

8. (15 minutes) Do your principal and administrators support you on discipline issues? Do you feel that dealing with discipline problems takes time away teaching? [IF YES] Is this problem due to a lack of training among teachers, lax enforcement of discipline policies at the schools, or are the kids so troubled that schools can't really reach them?

Do you have any final thoughts or comments?

Thank you so much for working so hard with us here!