



## MREL: Education Leadership Focus Group Protocol Parents

### (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?
  - We are here today, to understand, from YOUR perspectives, how your school system is doing, what their priorities should be and how they are doing addressing the challenges they face,
  - 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, and what you think about them, 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: how long you've lived in the area, what you do, how many children you have and what grade they are in. PROBE FOR QUIET TYPES: did you go to public school?
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 a High School 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. (10 minutes) What would you say are the main issues facing the schools that your children attend?
2. (20 minutes) We would like to know more about the main challenges you and your school face regarding:

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

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

- Teachers. How are the teachers in your schools? Are they engaging? Do they have mastery of the subjects they are teaching? Do they have control over their classrooms?
- Academic standards. Are the academic standards set by your schools sufficient? How should they be different?
- 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? [PROBE WITH EXAMPLES: study skills needed for college, vocational training, practical life skills like balancing a checkbook]

Student behavior. How is student behavior in schools? Is student safety a major issue or not?

- Teaching responsibility. Do the schools foster student character and responsibility? How do they do this?
- Achievement gaps. Do you feel there is an achievement gap between students of differing economic backgrounds, or between inner city schools and suburban schools? If so, what are the schools doing to address this? Are they succeeding or not?
- School leadership. Is the leadership at your children's school effective in dealing with issues? Why or why not?
- Technology and computers. Do your children have computers in the classroom? Is their teacher comfortable enough with the technology to help the students with it? Are they learning valuable skills? And they learning how to filter the information they gather? How else is technology integrated in the schools?
- Special needs students. How good a job are the schools doing in working with special needs populations, such as English language learners and Special Education. (GET FEEDBACK PARTICULARLY FROM PARENTS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN)

NOTE: 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?

3. (10 minutes) Do you think your schools share the same order of priorities that you do? If not, what do you think their priorities are?
4. (10 minutes) What are the obstacles to achieving significant gains in the priorities you mentioned (Why have they not yet been done)?
5. (10 minutes) What information are you getting about your child's teachers and schools? Do you know how your child and their school compare to others in your community? What other comparative information would be useful to you? (What would you do with it?)
6. (10 minutes) How do you think NCLB has affected the schools? [PROBE for positives and negatives. Find out about testing, and AYP. Get feedback on anyone whose school is falling short of NCLB guidelines].

\*\*\* 8 Minute Break \*\*\*

7. (15 minutes) We'd like to ask you a bit more about the teachers who have taught your children. In particular, how would you evaluate them on--
  - Knowing a lot about the subject they teach

- Treating students with respect
- Giving students extra help when they are falling behind
- Taking a personal interest in students and really get to know them
- Having high academic expectations for all of the students they teach
- Handling discipline problems quickly and fairly
- Having a real knack for inspiring and motivating kids to do their best
- Making sure disruptive students don't take over the class

8. (15 minutes) Now thinking about the principals, how would you evaluate them on:

- Communicating with parents in a timely and honest way
- Ensuring that the hallways and school grounds are safe and orderly
- Making sure that the worst teachers don't stay at the school
- Handling discipline problems
- Recruiting and holding on to great teachers
- Making sure that the curricula are really effective in helping kids learn as much as they can
- Giving teachers all of the support they might need to help students learn as much as they can

Do you have any final thoughts or comments?

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