MREL: Education Leadership 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 and geographic areas served, 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 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 teach students about building strong character

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 the students you are most directly involved with? Are there any other educational priorities and needs that you'd like comment on? Please be as specific as you can.

2. (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?

   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.]
   ▪ Teacher quality, teacher preparation, and professional development
   ▪ Teaching methods and curriculum aimed at enhancing academic achievement
   ▪ 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
- Technology as administrative tools, as well as classroom resources
- Communicating with state officials 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 environed, Interaction between special ed and non special ed students, Issues around mainstreaming]

[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?

3. (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

1. (30 minutes) Do you or someone else in your office regularly receive data about your school district or state? In general how useful is this research that you see?

   How satisfied are you that your own district has the information and analysis it needs to evaluate the performance of its EXISTING programs? And about the results it can expect from its NEW programs?

   Are there any specific challenges you face?
   - Getting the data you need in order to fill out NCLB reports
   - Collecting all the data you need to make decisions for your school district
   - Getting the data you need to make effective decisions about your school district
   - Working with the systems you use to collect data
   - Collecting all the data you need to comply with NCLB

- Storing the data you collect and making it accessible to those who need it
- Having data that is relevant to the challenges you feel most pressingly. [PROBE: Could you please give me an example?]
- Receiving the training that your district needs to understand how to ACCESS and INTERPRET the data you are collecting
- Finding the time needed to access the data for anything besides NCLB compliance

2. (15 minutes) Short of supplying additional funds, what forms of support would help your staff be more proactive within their agendas? (i.e. with program evaluation)

[If these items don't emerge earlier]

Are there any kinds of information, data, research, training, 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:

State level functions
- Budget allocation
- State accountability systems (e.g., building capacity to implement NCLB)
- Teacher quality
- Adolescent literacy
- Educational technology (e.g., integrating technology into the curriculum and online teaching and learning opportunities)

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

Do you have any final thoughts or comments?

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