

[School name]

[insert main research question or topic here]

Student Focus Groups

[date]

Facilitators' Guide

Prepared by Roberts & Kay, Inc.

for

The Partnership for Kentucky Schools

[insert date]

About Co-Facilitation

When you facilitate a focus group, you will work with a co-facilitator. At all times as you run the group, one of you will be the *lead* facilitator and one of you will be the *backup* facilitator. You should change roles one or more times during the group so that each facilitator is the lead and each is the backup about half the time. Ways to do this:

- Divide the introduction in half, and divide the Interview Questions in half. You can either do the division by switching back and forth frequently, or by dividing in large chunks.
- One person does all the introduction, and the other person does all the questions.
- Other divisions that suit you.

Once you reach the part of the focus group when you begin asking the Interview Questions, the person who is in the role of the backup facilitator should always be looking for opportunities to ask *spontaneous follow-up questions*.

About Three Types of Questions

After the introduction work is done, you and your co-facilitator will ask three types of questions:

1. **Interview Questions:** These are the main, numbered questions that are printed in **bold** type. The Work Group developed them specifically for this research. Ask each question exactly as it is written at least twice before doing any other thing to encourage responses. There are ___ Interview Questions for this study. They begin on page ___.
2. **Planned follow-up questions, or “probes”:** These are the written questions added in below Interview Questions _____. In most cases, facilitators should ask planned follow-up questions as written, if there is time, and if the participants have not already answered the question the follow-up is asking.
3. **Spontaneous follow-up questions:** These are the questions that the facilitators – especially the backup facilitator – ask after listening to the first responses to each question. Spontaneous follow-up questions encourage one person to say more, or encourage more people to say something, in response to a particular question. Beginning on page ___, each odd-numbered page in this Guidebook shows words or phrases you can use to create and use spontaneous follow-ups. You may find you will use 25 – 50 spontaneous follow-up questions in a well-facilitated focus group. The more spontaneous follow-up questions you use, and the better you use them, the *richer* and *deeper* and *more valid* your focus group findings will be.

About Time Tracking

Starting on page __, next to each question you will notice a space for the *elapsed time* and the *actual time*.

Before you run each focus group, you will need to fill in the actual clock time, like 9:30 AM, for your focus group session, with the first entry on page 2 being your focus group starting time. *Use a pencil*. Then you fill in the rest of the actual time blanks by adding time to your starting time.

The *elapsed time* space indicates how many minutes should have already passed in your focus group session, if you are following the time estimates for each question.

The actual time indicates the time on a clock, such as 9:45 AM or 10:30 AM. For example, beside Question __, the elapsed minutes says “ __ .” If your session started at 9:30, then your actual time here will be _____. You fill in all the blanks for *actual time* in advance, and this show you that by _____ you should be starting Question Two.

What matters most in focus group facilitation?

- Warmth and fun: It's not a test, so help people relax
- Neutrality: Every answer is Interesting!
- Balance: Work on hearing a lot from everybody.
- Purposefulness: You have important work to do together — and people trust you to know what they should do.

An essential repertoire of facilitator behaviors

- ✓ **Pause:** seven seconds

- ✓ **Invitation to express a different point of view:**
 - "Does anyone see it differently?"

- ✓ **Request more information:**
 - "Tell me more about that."
 - "I don't understand."
 - "Could you please say more?"
 - "Will you give me an example so I can understand better?"

- ✓ **For dominant talkers:**
 - Withdraw eye contact
 - Shift attention, "Thanks, Chris. Now I would like to hear how the rest of you feel about..."

- ✓ **For shy people:**
 - Try for *appropriate* eye contact
 - Ask that everyone (or a whole section of the table) respond to a question
 - (Less often, only when it seems appropriate) Call on the person by name for a response

- ✓ **For rambling types:**
 - Withdraw eye contact after the talk gets boring
 - Turn slightly away from the speaker
 - Do not take notes or reinforce the talk in any way
 - At a pause, say, "Thank you, Terry. Now I want to get some other people to jump in here on this question." Repeat the question, if necessary, to pull the focus back.
 - (Rarely) Interrupt. "Excuse me, Evelyn. I'm sorry to have to interrupt you, but I see other people would also like to answer this question and I want to make sure they have time." Then repeat the question.

Beautiful, spontaneous follow up questions

Q. What's one difference between an adequate focus group and a really good one?

A. Facilitators who ask good spontaneous follow-up questions.

Q. How?

A. You start with precise Interview Questions, which you ask exactly as written. [They are printed in bold type.]

Q. Then what?

A. As people start to answer, be curious, and try to learn all that you can.

Q. How?

A. Ask extra questions that make sense, things like: "Tell me more." "Could you say more about that?" "How does that happen, exactly?" Etc. (And stay away from "why" questions if you can.)

Follow this version if you prefer to use your own words.

(Elapsed time) 0:05 [Five minute allowance for lateness]

(Clock time) _____ Welcome, introductions, preliminaries, ground rules

Thank people for coming. Suggest they help themselves to snacks.

Mention the focus of discussion: _____

Underscore the main point: You are taking part in this group in order to help improve our school. We are listening, we are going to tape record your statements, and people are interested in hearing from you.

Check verbally on comfort: temperature, refreshments, any needed materials.

Introduce yourselves and your titles (“*We’ll be your facilitators*” or “*We’ll be asking you questions.*”). Don’t give personal details that could sway people’s opinions.

Say you’re going to turn on the tape recorder now.

Remind people they agreed to be audio taped when they signed their permission slips.

Explain the presence of the adult sponsor outside the room, and make it clear that he/she is listening. The purpose of the adult sponsor is to support the facilitators and to make sure that everyone stays safe and comfortable.

Tell how confidentiality is protected: no names or identities are ever used in the reports from the sessions. First names used during the session are taken out of written transcripts and never used in analysis or reporting.

Ask group members after the session to separate other people's names and views when they talk about the session. [Stop here and get a nod or other form of agreement from group members.]

Do introductions, using first names only. After going around once just for names, go around again with a question about something fun and interesting. [*"What is your favorite food?"* or *"What is your dream job when you grow up?"* or something else] Ask people to write their names on the table cards provided.

Explain that this is one of ____ student groups that will lead to a report to be produced in _____. All the groups will work on the same questions. The questions came from a Work Team made up of students, teachers, administrators, and a community person.

State the ending time for the session: _____

Emphasize that all comments and opinions are right and valued. You will not be asking questions that have wrong answers.

Emphasize that the purpose of the session is to see how many opinions there are about each topic. The purpose is not to make decisions or persuade each other. Explain that members of the group were picked intentionally to be different from each other.

Strongly encourage people to state their personal opinions, no matter what opinions others in the group may hold.

Explain that as facilitators, you will be the guides, and you will recognize people to speak. As much as possible, encourage people to speak one at a time, but assure them that if they get lively, you will help sort it all out and get it recorded for analysis.

Let people know that you may occasionally rush some section of the discussion they find interesting, and may even have to interrupt some people to move on to new topics or new speakers. On the other hand, they may notice you pulling more information from more people than they think is necessary. Remind them that you will be the one to worry about all this, and

you will make your decisions based on what the Work Team has decided to ask all the groups.

Ask people to speak for themselves alone, not for others or for the "average person."

Check for agreement. (*"Those are our ground rules. Can you agree to live them during this session?"*)

Ask if there are any questions.

[Now go to page __ for the Interview Questions.]

Hints for Spontaneous Follow Up Questions: *Curiosity in Action*

Note: Spontaneous follow up questions are the key to detail and depth. They help you get the good stuff that's below the first, "surface" answers.

Here are good first words for spontaneous follow up questions:

Please say more about that.

Can you give me more details?

Anybody else?

What is it about ...

Tell me more about ...

What is your experience with ...

Describe ...

Imagine ...

What caused you to ...

What features of X do you particularly like/dislike ...

How...When....Where....How often do you...

Note: Try to avoid "Why" questions because they can put people on the defensive and make them not want to answer questions at all.

The Interview Questions

Note: Ask the questions in bold type exactly as written, twice if necessary.

(Elapsed time) 0:15

(Clock time) _____ Question 1.

(Elapsed time) 0:

(Clock time) _____ Question 2.

(Elapsed time) 0:

(Clock time) _____ Question 3:

(Elapsed time) 0:

(Clock time) _____ Question 4.

Note: The person in the role of back-up facilitator should step outside right here and see if the adult has any suggestions.

(Elapsed time) 0:

(Clock time) _____ Question 5:

(Elapsed time) 0:

(Clock time) _____ Question 6:

(Elapsed time) 0:

(Clock time) _____ Question 7:

(Elapsed time) 1:

(Clock time) _____ Question 8:

(Elapsed time) 1:

(Clock time) _____ Question 9:

(Elapsed time) 1:

(Clock time) _____ Question 10: **Is there anything else you would like to add?**

This is your last chance! What would you like to say that you haven't gotten to say yet?

[If needed, you can explain that this question includes "any topic we did not cover that you want to talk about" or "here's some time for you to add to things you said earlier if you did not get done."]

[You can still use spontaneous follow up questions here if you have not run out of time. If people say things that could use

more explaining, you can always say, “Please tell us more about that.”]

(Elapsed time) 1:

(Clock time) _____

Thank people for coming, and say goodbye.