

“The Best Hour I’ve Spent in School”

**A Case Study
of the
2001 - 2002 *Turn Up the Volume* Projects
at
Noe and Westport Middle Schools
Louisville, Kentucky**

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A Case Study of the 2001-2002 *Turn Up the Volume* Projects in Noe and Westport Middle Schools, Jefferson County, Kentucky

Background

In December 2001, work teams at Noe Middle School and Westport Middle School in Jefferson County, Kentucky, completed their first *Turn Up the Volume* projects (qualitative student research) and delivered important new information to school decision makers about ways to improve school climate and student achievement. At Noe, the team of student and adult researchers asked students who live in the school’s “resides areas” about their views on getting their parents more deeply engaged in the life of the school, and learned some approaches to improving school climate. At Westport, the researchers focused on ways to improve the learning climate in their school, with particular attention to student responses to the newly launched Different Ways of Knowing (DWOK) initiative.

Turn Up the Volume projects engage work teams of students and adults in learning and using the skills of systematic, scientific, qualitative research to improve the school and student achievement in their own schools. Work teams from the schools involved in *Turn Up the Volume* projects learn to conduct research that helps them make wise choices about policy and practice in key areas of school performance and student achievement. *Turn Up the Volume* research works particularly well for research topics related to teaching and learning, school climate, and school safety.

Turn Up the Volume projects feature the use of trained student facilitators as researchers with other students, and depend on the active engagement of students as members of the research work team from the project inception through analysis and report writing. Appendix A, “A Quick Look at the *Turn Up the Volume* Process,” shows the outline of the content that the Partnership for Kentucky Schools addresses when meeting for the first time with schools or school representatives considering a new *Turn Up the Volume* project.

This case study describes the steps of the Westport and Noe projects from their beginning through the completion of written reports. The purpose of the case study is to tell an in-depth story, with supporting materials, about one *Turn Up the Volume* project that might be interesting to schools or community groups considering whether to undertake similar work. The case study has been completed before enough time has elapsed for new initiatives or changes resulting from the studies’ findings to be implemented in the two schools.

The project funding came from two sources. First, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, which proposed the *Turn Up the Volume* project to the Jefferson County middle schools, dedicated

more than \$14,000 to its support. The funds came from an Edna McConnell Clark Foundation renewal grant. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools, with which the Prichard Committee contracted for project implementation, added \$3500, primarily to expand the amount of technical assistance available to the two schools' work teams.

Getting Ready

Partnership for Kentucky Schools director Carolyn Witt Jones met with middle school officials in Jefferson County several times in 2000 and 2001 before the projects launched in August 2001. In those early meetings, Carolyn described the *Turn Up the Volume* process and suggested ways it could be used in Jefferson County middle schools. For a session on November 13, 2000, Carolyn arranged to take a former principal from Jessamine County and an assistant principal from Fayette County with her to a meeting with Jefferson County middle school officials and principals. Both of the educators who assisted Carolyn with the presentation had experience with *Turn Up the Volume* projects. Carolyn prepared these expert guests for the session by telling them of some of the concerns that had been expressed to date by middle school officials: "What will be done with the information? How 'public' will the results be? Who will see the results?" For an agenda from that session with middle school principals, see Appendix B, "The Jefferson County Middle School Game Plan."

In response to those concerns, Carolyn and the principals from Fayette and Jessamine Counties explained that each school that participates in a *Turn Up the Volume* project makes its own decisions about each of those issues. Carolyn underscored that the school itself commissions, guides, and owns the research.

Jefferson County middle school administrators, while interested in the approach, next expressed concerns about having Jefferson County students "studied" by outside researchers. Carolyn explained that *Turn Up the Volume* is not a research project the Partnership conducts with students as subjects, but rather is a set of skills the Partnership teaches to students and educators, typically across a three-year period, so that they establish sound, permanent skills in conducting school-based research internally to improve student achievement and school performance. *Turn Up the Volume* makes it possible for schools to do in-depth studies of their own effectiveness, policies, and practices. The one outside researcher involved serves not as an investigator but as coach, guide, facilitator, and technical advisor for the projects.

Jefferson County middle school administrators took the information Carolyn gave them and shared it with middle school principals. The administrators invited all interested middle school principals to meet with Carolyn to learn more of the details and decide whether to participate in projects during the 2001-2002 school year. Late in the spring of 2001, Carolyn met with interested middle school principals and described the *Turn Up the Volume* process, emphasizing how it adds a qualitative research aspect to the quantitative approaches schools typically use to study student satisfaction, assess teaching and learning, and inquire about school climate.

On July 17, 2001, Carolyn and *Turn Up the Volume* technical advisor Rona Roberts, of Roberts & Kay, Inc. (RKI) in Lexington, met with the three middle school principals who had decided to participate in *Turn Up the Volume* in 2001-2002: Louis Hughley, principal of Knight Middle School, Kathy Sayre, principal of Noe Middle School, and Sally Mackin, principal of Westport Middle School. Judy Staples, assistant principal at Noe Middle School, also joined this group. Sherry DeMarsh, Director of Middle School Instructional Support for Jefferson County Public Schools, arranged this meeting but was unable to attend.

Carolyn and Rona brought an agenda to the July 17 meeting that included these topics:

- , Why is the Partnership for Kentucky Schools supporting this effort?
- , What do focus group research projects make possible in middle schools?
- , What are some possible initial research topics for the three schools?
- , What are the main steps in the *Turn Up the Volume* process?
- , What firm decisions can we make today about next steps?

See Appendix C for the agenda from that meeting, “Jefferson County Middle School Focus Groups School Leaders’ First Work Session, July 17, 2001.”

The principals had many questions about logistics and workability. One of the most important questions at the outset related to the source of funds for substitutes for the two or three classroom teachers from each school who would participate in the two all-day work team sessions, the half-day facilitator training session, and the all-day analysis session that are at the heart of the *Turn Up the Volume* work. Carolyn and Rona did not know how the Jefferson County Public Schools intended to handle funding, availability, or other issues related to the needed substitutes. The principals at Noe and Westport said they could fund their own substitute teachers, if needed. Louis Hughley, principal at Knight Middle School, described the several improvement projects already going on at Knight and the resulting demands on the limited funds for substitutes. He said he doubted Knight could take part if the Jefferson County school district did not fund the substitutes.

Through later consultation with Sherry DeMarsh, the principals learned that they would need to fund the substitute expenses from their own school budgets. Sherry said she would take the responsibility to arrange for substitutes for the two teachers from each school who would be participating in the *Turn Up the Volume* work, but could not fund them. Knight Middle School subsequently withdrew from the project. Noe and Westport Middle Schools decided to go forward and complete research projects.

During the July 17 meeting, Rona and the school leaders worked out the complete schedule for all work sessions. In order to use the *Turn Up the Volume* results in the upcoming Jefferson County Public Schools Consolidated Plan, the principals decided to finish the research and ensure that their research reports were written by early December 2001, five months in the future, and four months after the start of school. The schedule included all dates for the full work team, and interim dates each month

for meetings with the project leaders from each school.

See Appendix D for the complete project schedule, “The Confirmed Timetable for Noe and Westport Middle Schools.”

The projects begin in earnest

After working out the complete calendar with the leadership group from the two schools and the Jefferson County Public Schools central office, the principals and assistant principals at Noe and Westport formed their work teams. Because this project started very close to the beginning of school, and because Westport, in particular, faced an unusual set of circumstances as it launched its new Different Ways of Knowing initiative, the leadership teams in both schools reported forming their work teams at the very last minute, just a day or so before the first work team met. Both teams chose students as a majority of the work team, which constituted a “first” in *Turn Up the Volume* history. Noe chose seven students, two teachers, two parents, the principal, and the assistant principal. Westport chose 14 students, two teachers, the principal, and the assistant principal. Both teams included about twice as many female as male students.

Each school chose its assistant principal as captain of the work team. In addition to handling many responsibilities for convening the work team and ironing out the logistics of running the focus groups, Noe team captain Judy Staples and Westport team captain Donna Reed served as the main contact persons for Rona Roberts, the technical advisor on the learning process.

First Work Team Session

The first work team session took place on August 29, 2001. Jefferson County Public Schools had been in session barely two weeks. The two teams assembled in the upstairs portion of the library at Noe Middle School. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools and Noe Middle School combined forces to offer generous morning refreshments at 8:00 A.M. The students and adults assembled around library tables and enjoyed the fruit, pastries, juices, tea and coffee as they began work.

Appendix E presents a copy of the participants’ agenda for the day. Appendix F includes the complete facilitator’s agenda for this first work session.

Rona opened with a description of the purpose for the day, and asked each person present to introduce herself or himself by first name and one piece of identifying information. Rona then briefly stated the main purpose of the day, described the agenda, and introduced and got agreement on some ground rules (called “Conversation Guidelines”) to guide the work teams’ sessions. These were the ground rules Rona proposed:

Proposed Conversation Guidelines:

1. Work together to make something new and valuable today.
2. Speak when you have good ideas.
3. Listen to understand others' ideas.
4. Suggest ways to combine and improve ideas.
5. Use basic courtesy.

When Rona asked whether anyone proposed changes to the Conversation Guidelines, one of the teachers suggested that the group agree on a way to come to order after working in small groups. She suggested that Rona or anyone in the group could raise a hand, which would signal to others noticing that they should raise a hand also, in order to catch the attention of the whole group quickly and make it easy to give additional instruction from the front of the room. The group agreed to this suggestion. Rona also introduced a small chime that she uses to produce a light ringing tone that signals a need to return attention to the front of the room.

Rona had planned to use an additional introductory process called "Human Spectrums" during this opening session, but chose not to do it because the space was not large enough. She saved this process for use during the second work session.

Rona chose to open the substantive work of the day by presenting a demonstration focus group to give the work team members a clear view of the heart of the research effort so they could have a concrete understanding of what their planning should produce. Before beginning the demonstration, Rona showed the work team members the single Research Question that frames the demonstration focus group: "What would it take to make learning at Noe and Westport Middle Schools so fun and interesting that both students and adults would rather be at school than anywhere else?"

Also before beginning the focus group, Rona asked all members of the work teams to draw a slip of paper from a hat. The slips suggested one particular aspect of facilitation to which that person could pay particular attention during the demonstration. The result was that several people looked specifically at each of these facilitation factors:

- , Welcome and hospitality
- , Neutrality
- , Confidentiality
- , Balance of participation

For the demonstration focus group, Rona simulated as many aspects of true focus groups as possible, including these features:

- , true random selection of participants

- , simulated permission forms
- , reliance on an overall research question
- , the use of interview questions
- , neutral facilitation
- , the use of “props” to vary question types
- , the use of audio equipment to tape-record the session

To achieve true random selection, Rona assigned each student a number and used a prepared random number table to draw a simple stratified random sample of four students -- two from each school, two males and two females. These students then participated in the demonstration focus group. See questions for the focus group in Appendix G, “Modeled Focus Group Questions, Noe and Westport Middle Schools.”

Rona then facilitated the demonstration focus group, complete with audio recording and the use of several props to support different styles of questions. After the conclusion of the demonstration, Rona led a conversation about it with the participants and the work team members, focusing specifically on the four aspects of facilitation that were on the slips.

The educators, parents, and students who observed the demonstration found it easy to identify aspects of warmth, hospitality, and neutrality in it. Confidentiality, of course, could not be directly identified during the focus group itself. Rona asked the observers to consider whether they had seen or heard anything during the demonstration that they would find difficult to keep confidential, had it been a real situation. That conversation served to begin preparing the students for their responsibilities to hold in confidence the focus groups they eventually would run or analyze.

Rona next described the outline of a focus group process from start to finish, as presented in the *Turn Up the Volume Toolkit*, pages 13 - 16. As a guide for this long set of tasks that the teams would address across multiple sessions, Rona produced a printed “checklist” for each student and also repeatedly used an overhead projector and a transparency version of the checklist to show the work team members each step they were taking and record the decisions each work team’s members made about how each step would be completed in the two schools. See the checklist in Appendix H, “Checklist.”

Rona introduced to the work team members the differences between *Research Questions*, which are the major statements of the purpose of the inquiry — the questions the research is being conducted in order to answer — and *Interview Questions*, which are the user-friendly, specific, engaging questions facilitators actually ask focus group participants. Rona noted that these differences are crucial to the success of a *Turn Up the Volume* project, and are carefully described, with examples, in the *Turn Up the Volume Toolkit*. Rona emphasized that the teams should construct no more than three Research Questions (with one being the ideal) and no more than ten Interview Questions.

By late morning, each work team had developed first drafts of research questions. Members of both teams wrote their questions on overhead transparencies, and each team considered and made suggestions and improvements to the other's research questions. After lunch the work continued, expanding to include the first drafts of Interview Questions.

At the end of the first day, the two work teams' products looked like this: ("RQ" means "Research Question" and "IQ" means "Interview Question.")

Westport

RQ A: What type of classroom activities/experiences help students learn better?

IQ 1: Besides grades, what makes you proud of your work?

IQ 2: What is your most memorable learning experience last year?

RQ B: How can teachers' actions impact student learning?

IQ 3: Compare your ideal or favorite teacher's attitude to an animal and explain why.

IQ 4: What kinds of things do your teachers do that you would continue to do if you were in charge of your own class?

IQ 5: Tell me about differences noticed from a teacher last year to a teacher this year.

[alternative] Have you noticed anything different about the ways teachers are teaching this year?

RQ C: How could the school environment enhance student learning?

IQ 6: Select from these five pictures what you would like your classroom to look like, and explain.

IQ 7: What is the first step that you would take to make Westport a better place for us?

Noe

RQ A: What can Noe students do to get their parents more involved in/at school?

IQ 1: Explain the types of activities your parents attend at your school?

IQ 2: What type of events would you like to have at school that would involve your parents/guardian?

IQ 3: What activities do you want your parents to attend?

IQ 4: When you really want your parents to come to school, what do you do to get them here?

IQ 5: What could you share about Noe Middle that might get them more involved?

IQ 6: How do you talk to your parents about school?

Each work team made these additional decisions during the first work session:

- , The students on the work team will serve as the facilitators for the focus groups in the two schools. (This runs counter to the best ideas from previous *Turn Up the Volume* projects, and the technical advisor did not think it was a great idea.)
- , The focus groups will be gender-alike. (Recommended by past *Turn Up the Volume* experience and the technical advisor)
- , Gender-alike teams will facilitate the focus groups. (Recommended by past *Turn Up the Volume* experience and the technical advisor)

These three decisions, taken together, had an impact on the plans for focus groups at both schools. Because the work groups contained about twice as many female as male students, male facilitators would need to facilitate multiple groups of male students, while female facilitators would likely facilitate one group each, in order to ensure a balance in the number of male and female groups at each school.

During the course of the day, Rona briefly described the upcoming work on analysis and invited all of those who found the description of analysis appealing to sign up to be on the analysis team. Rona described analysis as fun for those who like it, challenging, and requiring a good deal of focus. She described the process of taking written transcripts from each focus group and identifying themes and good quotes within each transcript as a way to help answer the research questions. Rona said that an analysis room gets filled with flip chart paper and sticky notes and cards as people work out their strategies for identifying important information within each focus group.

The full day of analysis had been set for November 6. Rona asked that at least some of the adults from each team be present. All teachers signed up for the analysis team, as did both assistant principals and the Westport principal. Of the 21 total students, 17 signed up to be on the analysis teams.

Beginning at the first session and continuing for the duration of the work team experience, Rona worked to create a warm, relaxed climate for learning. Drinks and snacks, including candy, were available

throughout the day, and work team members moved about the small work space freely. The group took rather frequent breaks. Rona brought a large box of art supplies and toys to help stimulate work team members' creativity as they considered ways to structure questions that would engage middle school focus group participants. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools provided a large, delicious boxed lunch. These amenities helped build a collegial, comfortable work climate for students and adults who were working together as peers for the first time. Attention to creating a pleasant work climate continued throughout the life of the project.

Second Work Team Session

The second work team session took place, unfortunately, on September 11, 2001 in the auditorium at Westport Middle School. Of course the day could not be completed as planned, but it began normally. At around 8:00 AM, Rona and Westport team captain Donna Reed arranged the room so that it reflected the round table and chairs of the Noe Upper Library. The Westport auditorium is a large, second floor room with lots of windows, tables that can be arranged in almost any configuration, and chairs that are easily moved. Westport Middle School and the Partnership for Kentucky Schools again provided great morning refreshments, snacks and drinks, and a good lunch to help support the work of the work teams.

When work began at 8:30, Rona gave all work team members agendas and packets of materials that mirrored the overhead transparencies she intended to use during the day. These materials reminded work team members of the conversation guidelines, reiterated the "why" behind focus group research, showed the types of focus group research other schools had completed, introduced specific locations of key sections within the *Turn Up the Volume Toolkit*, and gave them a new copy of the long "checklist" of tasks involved in completing the project. Appendix I presents the Participants' Agenda for the day. See Appendix J for the Facilitator's Agenda for the day.

Rona first invited the members of the two work teams to get reacquainted and warmed up for work by taking part in a quick, interesting learning process called "Human Spectrums." Human spectrums involve creating an imaginary line that has two ends, or "poles," each of which represents a contrasting fact or a preference that is completely positive. People then stand somewhere along the imaginary line, revealing a spectrum of different views, experiences, or preferences. Rona used three simple spectrums as a warm-up:

- , Date of birth, from January 1 to December 31 (month and day only, not years)
- , Time of day of peak performance [from 5 AM (very early) on one pole to 4 AM (very late) on the other]
- , Shirt/blouse color (a literal light-dark color spectrum, just for fun)

Rona then showed the work teams their Research Questions and Interview Questions as they had developed them so far, and reminded the teams about the distinction between the two types of

questions. Rona pointed out that while Research Questions reflect the main thrust or “mystery” that drives the research project, Interview Questions are the prompts that facilitators use to get students talking about the topics of the research. Rona reminded the work team members that every Interview Question should help address a Research Question in some crucial way.

The work teams assembled themselves and began work on devising good interview questions and strategies. At about 9:30 a.m., Westport principal Sally Mackin, who was working with the Westport team, received a message that an airline had crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City. She told Rona, and the two of them decided Principal Mackin would check out the accuracy of the story before they decided what action to take. Within moments, Principal Mackin announced the news of the attacks on the public address system for the entire school.

The adult work team members caucused to decide how to respond. Throughout Westport Middle School, teachers had stopped teaching and turned on televisions for students to watch as events continued to unfold. The adult work team members decided to offer the student work team members a choice about how to proceed. Students were asked to choose whether to stop work and return to their respective classrooms, continue work uninterrupted, or continue work with some occasional breaks for television viewing. The students chose the last option. They asked to watch television for about 30 minutes, or until they felt they knew what had happened, followed by a return to work until lunch time, at which point they would watch television again. Shortly after a television was brought into the room and turned on, the second World Trade Center tower collapsed as students watched. Students were relatively subdued in their expressed responses to all of these events, primarily asking, “Is this real?” “Is this happening right now?”

Adults in the room felt and showed significant distress. Noe Team Captain Judy Staples left the school as soon as she heard the news about the attack on the first World Trade Center tower because of concerns about a family member working in that area of New York City.

Although both the students and the adults tried hard to carry out work in the intervals of not watching television, this work session was terribly challenging to all who took part. Much of the work simply could not be done during that day. Rona promised the work team members from both schools that she would be in close communication by e-mail and telephone and that she would come back as needed to help each school get ready to carry out the focus groups on time so that the transcripts could be prepared and ready for the November 6 analysis session.

Within a week after September 11, e-mail, which had been a strong, steady component of the planning and implementation for the projects, became unavailable as a tool for completing any work with the work teams. The Jefferson County Public Schools’ computer system, along with the Kentucky Department of Education’s system and many others, was struck by the Nimda computer virus. This meant that communication between Rona and the entire work team simply could not take place in any easy way. Rona and the team captains, along with the two school principals and Sherry DeMarsh from

the Jefferson County Public Schools Central Office, worked through the remaining planning issues primarily by phone and mail.

Because of both the impact of September 11 events and the subsequent difficulties communicating with all work team members, the questions underpinning the research in both schools did not get as much work team attention and testing as would have been ideal. The team captains and Rona worked together to complete revisions to the questions based on the conversations the work teams had been having at the time of the interruption on September 11. More student attention to the questions would have been preferable, but could not be arranged.

Here are the final versions of those questions:

Noe

RQ: What can Noe students do to get their parents more involved in/at school?

IQ 1: Here is a list of activities we have at Noe after school and during school. [Hand out the list.] Circle the activities that your parents, grandparents, or guardians attend at Noe Middle. The activities are listed above the line.

IQ 2: Below the line there is a place for you to list those activities that you would like your parents, grandparents, or guardians to attend, if you were part of the activities. Please list as few or as many as you want.

C Tell us more about what makes you want your parents to be here for the events you circled.

IQ 3: Imagine an activity you might like that Noe doesn't offer right now, and tell us about a new event or activity that you would like your parents, grandparents, or guardians to attend.

C What would make this fun for you?

C What would make this fun for your parents, grandparents, or guardians?

C What would help you get your parents, grandparents, and guardians to come to this new activity?

IQ 4: Maybe there are times when you don't want your parents, grandparents, and guardians at school. If that's true for you, please describe those times.

- C What is the difference between times you do want your parents, grandparents, and guardians to come to school and times you don't want them to come?
 - C Are there things Noe Middle School could do to make it easier for you when your parents, grandparents, and guardians come to school?
- IQ 5: If there is a time when you really want your parent, grandparent, or guardian to come to school, what would you do to try to persuade them to come?
- IQ 6: What can you and other students do to get your parents to attend more events at Noe?
- C If you have some "secret strategies" that you think might help other students get their parents to come to events at school, would you please share them?
- IQ 7: What can the teachers and staff at Noe Middle do to get your parents, grandparents, and guardians to attend more events at Noe?
- C Imagine the best thing Noe could possibly do to help you get your parents, grandparents, and guardians to come to school. What would that be?
- IQ 8: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Westport

RQ A: What type of classroom activities/experiences help students learn better?

RQ B: How can teachers' actions impact student learning?

RQ C: How could the school environment enhance student learning?

IQ 1: What type of classroom activities or experiences help you learn better?

IQ 2: Do you ever do school work that makes you feel proud and makes you want to do it again?

IQ 3: Think about a classroom experience that was so exciting at the time that you were disappointed when the class period ended, and you wanted the class to continue. Share it at this time.

- IQ 4: Think about a favorite teacher or an ideal teacher. Now select an animal that you believe reflects that teacher's attitude. Remember, attitude, not appearance. Pick a stuffed animal that resembles your favorite teacher's attitude.
- IQ 5: What classroom activities do your teachers do that you would continue if you were in charge of your own class?
- IQ 6: Different Ways of Knowing is a way of teaching so all students can be successful. All students learn differently. Some learn by listening. Some need to see something. All learn by participating in activities that are fun and meaningful to them. Can you give some examples of the DWOK teaching techniques that you observed this year so far?
- IQ 7: [Photos] Here's a selection of middle school classrooms. Select one picture of the classroom that you would like to be in and tell what you like about it, and why.
- IQ 8: What's missing from the picture that you would include to make the classroom better?
- IQ 9: What is the first step you would take to make Westport a better place for us?
- IQ 10: Is there anything else you would like to say?

The Nimda virus also interrupted the communication between the two schools and the Jefferson County Central Office data expert who had agreed to draw the schools' random samples, based on research characteristics each work team provided. This slowdown resulted in a delay in the launch of the Westport focus groups, and, in fact, prevented Westport from conducting any pilot tests of its Interview Questions.

Half-Day Facilitator Trainings at Each School

Rona trained the facilitators from the two schools separately, in three-hour sessions at each school. Before each training session, Rona and someone at the school produced a guidebook for the facilitators that featured basic facilitator instructions and then presented the interview questions for that school in a format that included suggestions about amount of time per question and particular features of each question. See the Noe Facilitator Guidebook in Appendix K.

During the three-hour training session, Rona asked the students to concentrate on the four principles of facilitation she had introduced during the first work session: welcome and hospitality, neutrality, confidentiality, and balance of participation. She demonstrated and asked students to practice the opening of a focus group, asking each interview question, and closing the focus group. Students first practiced in facilitator pairs, and then demonstrated their skills to the larger group.

Rona worked with the facilitators to help them understand specifically how to construct new spontaneous follow-ups after they asked their main question as written. This was the first time Rona had attempted to teach students about the use of both spontaneous and planned follow-up questions. The facilitator guidebooks gave some written prompts to help students form appropriate spontaneous follow-up questions. Here are some examples:

How...

What is it about ...

Tell me more about ...

What is your experience with ...

Describe ...

Imagine ...

The facilitator training in each school served as an opportunity to form the facilitator pairs and assign facilitators to specific focus groups planned for specific times and locations. Rona suggested that facilitators form same-gender pairs that included as much diversity as possible. Rona explained that having the facilitators reflect two different races or grade levels, for example, increased the chances that each student in a focus group would feel comfortable relating to one of the facilitators. With that instruction, the students formed their own pairs.

The facilitator training also gave the work teams the necessary information about the type of audio equipment they needed, and gave the teams time to plan how they would manage audio recording. Members of the two teams also worked out specific plans for ensuring that adult sponsors would be present outside the room during each focus group.

Running the Focus Groups and Transcribing the Tapes

All focus group research projects run into unexpected issues and barriers, and strong work teams like the ones at Noe and Westport find ways around them. In spite of all the difficulties, Noe work team members and student facilitators completed six focus groups (four female and two male) and Westport completed eight groups (four female and four male) by mid-October. Noe administrators reported having particular difficulty in persuading the randomly recruited students to return their parental permission slips. As a result, the Noe groups were smaller and fewer in number than the work team had intended.

The lack of time to do a pilot test of questions proved to be a crucial gap at Westport, since the

Westport Interview Questions that had appealed most to Westport and Noe students during the work sessions proved to be hard for students in the actual focus groups to answer as intended. In particular, a question using props proved to be problematic. The question asked students to select a favorite stuffed animal from a group of available animals and describe how that animal's characteristics reminded them of either an ideal or favorite teacher. Though the question had worked well in a preliminary test with work team members, in actual use it failed to elicit many qualities of great teachers. Instead, facilitators found they had difficulty persuading students to consider qualities related to teaching rather than physical qualities similar to the animal's physical qualities. This problem had surfaced in the work team run-through of the draft interview question, but had been dismissed as not having particular significance. A true pilot at Westport would likely have made the problem plain, and would have given the work team time to make the question more effective.

The next challenge related to producing useful transcripts from these 14 tapes. RKI handled the transcription for the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, using contract transcriptionists. RKI had difficulty finding experienced transcriptionists. In addition, microphone placement and, perhaps, the quality of microphones and recording equipment, meant that soft-spoken students in several of the focus groups could not be heard. Transcriptionists expressed considerable frustration at the number of inaudible or simultaneous conversation comments in each transcription.

In spite of these difficulties, RKI completed the transcripts and mailed copies for all work team members to the team captains five days before the analysis session on November 6. This constituted the first Middle School *Turn Up the Volume* Project with transcripts for all work team members, a major improvement in the overall *Turn Up the Volume* process. The improvement came because the transcripts placed all analysis team members (who constituted most, but not all, of the work team members from the two schools) in an equal position with regard to accurate data.

In addition, the transcripts offered another unforeseen benefit. The student facilitators looked at their own transcripts and spontaneously conducted self-critiques. Most could see immediately where they had adhered to the principles of skilled neutral facilitation, and where they had departed from those principles. They could see, as well, how the participants responded in each case. For many of the facilitators, these transcripts brought both delight and sharply focused learning.

Analysis

The analysis began on November 6, 2001 at 8:30 a.m. in the Westport auditorium, with plenty of good refreshments. Rona often refers to the analysis session as a "party" and had invited work team members to "dress down" for the day. Since analysis work involves considerable use of cutting and pasting, and often produces large pieces of paper taped together to produce oversize sections that can best be managed on the floor, jeans and casual clothes are practical as well as comfortable for analysis work.

Rona explained to the 20 members of the two work teams who had chosen to do analysis that their job during the day would be to identify the key findings of the focus groups conducted in their respective schools. Rona explained that analysis involves identifying themes, key findings, and good quotes that help the report writers prepare for their important duties. Westport report writer Donna Reed and Noe report writer Holly Holland both participated in the analysis session. Partnership for Kentucky Schools Cadre member Betty Lindsey also joined the analysis session and assisted both work teams throughout the day.

Rona described to the group their task — primarily a search for themes that showed up in multiple focus groups, the identification of strong quotes that support themes or assertions, and the identification of any differences among subgroups. See Appendix L for the overhead material used during this session. Also see pages 127 - 145 in the *Turn Up the Volume* toolkit.

Rona suggested to both work teams that they cut apart one set of their transcripts and sort the responses into individual Interview Questions and responses. This made it easy for them to put together on large sheets of paper all their groups' answers to Interview Question 1, then Interview Question 2, and so on. Rona emphasized that the purpose of analysis is to answer the *Research* questions, and that the path to understanding the answer to the Research Questions lies through the work of understanding how participants have answered each Interview Question.

All work team members, particularly students, worked enthusiastically on the analysis task. Work team members divided themselves into small groups of two or three to tackle each Interview Question, identifying the main points within the participants' responses to that question, and highlighting or circling particularly good quotes that the report writers might use to document the claims related to the findings.

The analysis party ended at 1:30. The report writers walked out with a great deal of messy-looking but organized paper to help them prepare their drafts. Each report writer agreed to draft an initial report and circulate it among all work team members for comments before making the draft final. The report writers affirmed their intention to complete their final drafts by December 7. The report writers did circulate drafts, and made changes based on comments, before producing the final reports, which are attached in Appendices M (Noe) and N (Westport).

CONCLUSION

Every *Turn Up the Volume* project has its own dynamics. Each one results in some "firsts." The Jefferson County *Turn Up the Volume* project was particularly noteworthy for several reasons, which are noted below, along with the learning the Partnership gained from the "first."

1. The start-up, which included making contact with the Jefferson County Public Schools and making repeated efforts to engage principals in conducting the projects, took a significantly long time. Multiple players, including guest principals from other *Turn Up the Volume* schools,

made presentations to different groups of Jefferson County Public Schools decision makers and principals.

The Partnership learned that persistence and patience can lead to successful projects, even when the start-up period extends longer than two years.

2. Before working with the Jefferson County middle schools, the Partnership had not faced the issue of individual schools paying for substitutes out of their own budgets so that teacher work team members could participate in the work team sessions. In Jefferson County, this one consideration caused an interested middle school principal to remove his school from the project because of competing demands for funding for substitutes at his school.

The Partnership learned that the costs for substitutes need to be explained early to schools or districts as they consider whether or not to undertake *Turn Up the Volume* projects.

3. The Jefferson County projects in the fall of 2001 constituted the first time the Partnership had worked with student majorities on work teams. From the first moments of the day of the first work session, it became clear that student majority work teams can offer significant strength in middle school settings. Students participated in the work more eagerly and actively than in previous projects. They did not wait for adults to take the lead in planning. This pattern held true throughout the work sessions, and was particularly aided by the skill and commitment to mutual learning that all adult work team members brought to this effort.

From this experience, the Partnership learned to suggest to schools forming work teams that student majorities are highly desirable and boost the quality of student participation and learning significantly.

4. Rather than deciding how many focus groups to run and then who should facilitate them, as the *Turn Up the Volume* experience and guide book suggest, the Noe and Westport work teams both decided to use their student work team members as facilitators and then backed into the decision about how many focus groups, of which gender, to run. This meant that some students who may not have been particularly well-suited to facilitation ended up serving as facilitators, and it also meant that the schools did not base their decision about numbers of focus groups and types of focus group participants solely on the research question. This appeared to create some weakness in facilitation, although that weakness may not have had a significant negative impact on the results.

The Partnership learned that students on work teams are very likely to be eager to carry out all steps in the process, including facilitation. For this reason, the Partnership learned that it needs to counsel schools even more carefully about their selection of students for work team members. The Partnership always advises school leaders to choose students who reflect a

broad spectrum of student experience (age; geographic differences, if appropriate; “street” leadership skills; grade performance; differences in degree of participation in high-profile student activities) rather than simply choosing several already prominent student leaders. The Noe and Westport experiences suggest that the Partnership needs to anticipate that student members of the work team also should meet criteria for becoming good facilitators. In other words, in addition to the other qualities the schools seek in their student work team members, the Partnership learned that it needs to encourage school leaders to choose students who are likely to listen well and enjoy encouraging other students to participate.

5. This was the first time two middle schools had participated in a joint *Turn Up the Volume* planning process, with a shared timetable for results. This approach worked particularly well. The students from each school enjoyed working with and being with students from the other school, even though much of the work was done with intact school groups in a shared workshop space. In addition, the presence of middle school students from another middle school made it easy to do trial runs of interview questions and shape them up a bit before further testing. Finally, the fact that both schools took part and agreed to a timetable early on, including the necessity for substitutes, may have helped keep the entire process timely. Because of the extent to which the analysis day, in particular, was locked in on the substitute request schedule, both schools did all that was necessary to adhere to the timetable.

The Partnership learned that fixed dates on which substitutes are available can help keep *Turn Up the Volume* projects on time. On-time projects offer definite benefits to the schools that sponsor them, particularly when the resulting findings are to be used in structured planning efforts.

These Jefferson County projects helped the Partnership learn more about the impact of *Turn Up the Volume* projects on students, primarily those who serve on work teams, but also those who participate in a focus group. Student members of *Turn Up the Volume* work teams typically find themselves working as peers with adults for the first time as they plan and carry out the precise research steps. Both students and adults have specialized knowledge that is both crucial to the success of the inquiry and unavailable if they do not contribute it. For most students, having their own views carry serious weight with adults is a new and affirming experience. Following the first all-day work session, one student member of the Westport work team sent Rona an e-mail expressing this sense of being respected as a thinker and a contributor:

I had a lot of fun on Wednesday Aug.29th, 2001. Turn Up The Volume is an excellent program. I feel that my voice is really being heard by our staff and that I can make a difference in my school. I'm looking forward to our next meeting. I think you will find that Westport will work very hard on this "journey" that we have started. I know I will give it my all. You know, I felt very relaxed in the meeting on Wednesday. I didn't feel pressured I felt I could share my ideas and not have someone say that I was wrong. I

felt like I was treated as an individual, and not a student that has to be watched like a hawk all the time.

The adults who chose the student work team members and then worked alongside them for four months said they noticed strong increases in student work team members' abilities and confidence. Here are two examples of statements from adult work team members:

This process helped our kids' self-esteem. It helped the facilitators grow and feel better about school. It developed their leadership skills. They felt important and valued. (Westport Middle School, Louisville, Kentucky)

We picked kids who we wouldn't normally have picked. We were so pleasantly surprised at how the kids grabbed the topic and became leaders. It showed us these kids had some leadership qualities we hadn't seen. (Noe Middle School, Louisville, Kentucky)

With regard to the impact on students who participated in a one-time focus group, evidence from the Noe and Westport studies confirms what the Partnership has seen in other schools. Many student participants report that the depth of conversation and the experience that someone is listening intently to their views about the school is singular and important to them, even though it is brief, and is not repeated. One student participant at Noe Middle School spoke for many: "This is the best hour I've ever spent in school." Like facilitators and educators in other schools who have completed *Turn Up the Volume* projects, the Noe and Westport work team members reported that student participants pleaded for more opportunities to talk together about ways to improve the school. Though the *Turn Up the Volume* focus groups are primarily research processes designed to develop sound data for decision-making about school improvement, the work also constitutes student engagement.

Students' responses to this brief engagement opportunity starkly point out their longing for more opportunities to influence their own school's direction and practices. The Partnership has learned that *Turn Up the Volume* research can help schools start building a more engaged student body. The Noe and Westport experience provides further evidence of that possibility.

Appendix A

A Quick Look at the Turn Up the Volume Process

When do people need a Turn Up the Volume project?

- , When a school or district wants to learn a powerful new way to find out what will work with students
- , When a school or a school district wants to make substantial improvements in student achievement, school climate, school safety, or students' sense of belonging and satisfaction with school
- , When most students have been left out of decision-making about their schools, and most students are not taking responsibility for their own learning
- , When the challenges or opportunities are complex, and insight is needed in order to support good decision-making about teaching and learning strategies, school climate changes, or school safety

What is included in the Turn Up the Volume tool kit?

- , A rationale for the use of student focus group research
- , Detailed instructions for planning and carrying out research quality focus group studies with students as the facilitators of the groups
- , Brief descriptions of ways to talk informally with students about teaching and learning or other issues that affect their academic achievement

What groups or individuals should be interested in Turn Up the Volume?

- , Schools or school districts that face complex changes and want students as active partners in the change
- , Schools or school districts that are looking for improved ways to boost student academic performance, improve school climate or culture, or increase safety, or boost students's sense of respect, belonging, and satisfaction with school
- , School-community groups that want to work with schools to make any of these improvements

What size group can carry out a Turn Up the Volume project most effectively?

- , A good project depends completely on having a strong, diverse work team. An ideal work team size is 8 - 15 members. A significant number need to be students, and the group needs to include key administrators, respected teachers, and active parents as well. It is important that the work team reflect the school's diversity in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, and other differences, since diversity often underlies problems and holds the promise for new, better strategies. The person responsible for writing the final report needs to be included in the work

team from the beginning.

Approximately what is the least/greatest amount of time required to carry out a Turn Up the Volume project?

- , For a complete student focus group study of an issue related to student achievement, the time investment is intensive: at least four months elapsed time, with a few key players investing around 60 hours in implementation. Work team members typically invest 15 - 20 hours each. One or more writers/analysts may invest another 20-30 hours.
- , For the simpler forms of engaging students in talking about teaching, learning, and school climate, it is possible to carry out some in a very few minutes, and others with no more than 30 minutes of preparation and perhaps 30 - 60 minutes implementation.

What individuals (key positions), institutions, agencies, or organizations need to participate to implement a Turn Up the Volume project most effectively?

- , School leadership must be committed to a student focus group study, or it cannot happen. The commitment must be active and steady. Because many decisions must be made as the study unfolds, school leadership must play a hands-on role. A simple “sign off” will not work. In addition, without active participation, school leaders may not be willing to put changes in place as a result of the project; without that willingness, the effort will mostly be wasted.
- , Educators in affected schools must be willing to assist and willing to consider changes that are proposed as a result of the focus group.
- , Every focus group study must have at least one school insider involved who knows all about how to work creatively within school policies and rules, and who has some power to make the rules work for good causes.
- , Simpler forms of student conversation can be carried out by one adult educator without anyone else needing to be involved at all.

What is the anticipated outcome if a Turn Up the Volume project is carried out successfully?

- , Well done student focus group research yields information, unavailable through any other source, for use in making teaching and learning practices more effective so students will participate more eagerly and more successfully in learning.
- , If researchers successfully engage students in good focus groups, listen to what students say, and let students know the changes that have resulted from the focus groups, students' sense of

belonging and confidence in their schools can increase.

, Students, educators, and community people who work closely with student focus groups will all build better analytical skills, better listening skills, and better research skills, all of which can be applied to many situations.

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Appendix B

The Jefferson County Middle School Game Plan

Monday, November 13, 2000

1:00 and 3:00 PM EST

The Team: Carolyn Witt Jones, Director of the Partnership for Kentucky Schools
Kim Parker Brown, Associate Principal, Lexington Traditional Magnet School
Richard Williams, East Jessamine High School
Rona Roberts, RKI

Goal: Give principals the information they need to decide whether to do student focus group research on issues related to improving student achievement. We hope two or three principals will decide to do a student focus group research project this year.

Time available: One hour, including questions and conversation. We will do two one-hour sessions with two different groups of principals.

1:00/3:00 Background: Why did the Partnership for Kentucky Schools become involved in this work? Carolyn

- C What were the reasons
- C What have been the practical outcomes so far
- C What opportunities does this work offer schools and school leaders?

1:10/3:10 How have schools and school districts used this new tool to improve student achievement? Rona, Kim, Richard

- C The array of key questions (Rona)
- C How and why one middle school used student focus groups (Kim)
- C How and why one district has used student focus groups twice (Richard)
- C Any leftovers (Rona)

1:25/3:25 Things to consider as you consider student focus group research — Carolyn

- C We're not selling, we're inviting, looking for learning partners
- C What we can offer as coaches; a bit about the scope of work for the school team
- C Yes, it is a lot of work, but it is one useful new tool in finding out things you need and want to know that only students presently know
- C Fit with school/district planning (if not already addressed)
- C Not a cookie cutter; tailored to each school situation
- C How to let us know if you want to participate, and deadline

1:30/3:30 Questions, conversation

2:00/3:00 Adjourn

Appendix C

Jefferson County Middle School Focus Groups School Leaders' First Work Session, July 17, 2001 *Proposed Agenda*

- 1:00 Welcome and Introductions — All
- Purpose of the meeting — Carolyn Witt Jones: To launch essential, usable student research at Knight, Noe, and Westport Middle Schools for the 2001-2001 school year
- Why the Partnership for Kentucky Schools is involved, and how — Carolyn
- 1:10 What do focus groups make possible in middle schools? A quick introduction— Rona Roberts
- C Development of new knowledge
 - C Access to authentic information about how to improve teaching, learning, school climate, and safety
 - C Stronger, more realistic data for consolidated plans
 - C Broadly applicable new leadership and inquiry skills for students, staff, and parents
- 1:20 First consideration of potential research topics at Knight, Noe and Westport — All
- C What do you really need to know to improve student achievement at your school?
- 1:40 A quick introduction to the focus group process — Rona; See pages 13 - 18
- C Work team at each school, page 21
 - C Major work components, page 13
 - C Time estimates, page 17
 - C Two possible time tables, attached
- 2:00 More about the nature of the support that will come from the Partnership for Kentucky Schools — Carolyn
- 2:10 Second consideration of potential research topics at each school — All
- 2:20 Firm decisions about next steps
- C Key roles in each school
 - C Next steps for the “leadership caucus”
 - C Plans and information for communicating with each other
- 2:30 Adjourn

Frequently Asked Questions about *Turn Up the Volume* Research Projects

1. Why is the Partnership for Kentucky Schools interested in supporting *Turn Up the Volume* projects?
 - C We are committed to highlighting the value of the student voice in school matters.
 - C We find that good *Turn Up the Volume* projects lead to increased respect and student responsibility for learning.
 - C We are committed to supporting schools and communities working on tough issues, particularly those that affect student achievement and satisfaction in Kentucky public schools; often this work is made easier by student-based research.
 - C We believe effective school decision-makers must have the very best information for making wise decisions; solid student-based research yields invaluable new knowledge and information.

2. What are the benefits of a successful *Turn Up the Volume* project?
 - C Solid information about what students value and resist, and what will engage students effectively in their own learning, stated in students' own words
 - C Information that is different from and richer than survey information, and adds to it
 - C Defensible, "real time" information to support complex aspects of Consolidated Plans
 - C An increase in students' sense of being respected and valued as part of school communities
 - C Increases in student and adult research skills; this work is not just for the "top" students — *Turn Up the Volume* is engaging and useful with average students as well

3. What does a *Turn Up the Volume* project involve?
 - C Active commitment by school leaders, and strong, patient support by school councils or the board
 - C A strong captain who will solve problems and make things happen
 - C A good time table and enough time (one good time table: planning starts in August for research in January, findings in early March)
 - C A solid Work Team that includes educators, students, and parents
 - C Ultimate goal: plan and carry out scientifically constructed, defensible research, using students as facilitators, with guidance and coaching from the Partnership for Kentucky Schools

4. What are some "Danger Signs" — reasons NOT to do a *Turn Up the Volume* project? :
 - C If key decision-makers are uninterested in using the results to bring about change
 - C If key leaders do not support it enthusiastically
 - C If the intent is to settle a score or find out who is "right" in a conflict
 - C If the needed resources of time, energy, and money are not available
 - C If students are not valid participants in each aspect of the planning and implementation

Two Possible Time Tables for Jefferson County Middle Schools

NOTE: All work to be completed by Work Teams in each participating Middle School, with support from the Partnership for Kentucky Schools

If you want to complete the research before Christmas:

August

- Form work team
- Within the school community, publicize the intention to do the project; announce topic
- Develop the research questions and interview questions

Leadership caucus: August 28, 3 PM

Joint Work Team session: August 23, 10 AM - 3 PM

September

- Decide on ideal participant mix
- Work out logistics for focus group sessions
- Identify, recruit, and get parental permission for student facilitators
- Draw sample and recruit student participants, and get parental permissions
- Train student facilitators
- Sponsor student facilitator practice sessions

Leadership caucus: September 18, 3 PM

Joint Work Team session: September 11, 10 AM - 3 PM

October

- Run pilot groups, make necessary changes
- Run all groups
- Produce transcripts or other written record
- Begin analysis

Leadership caucus: October 16, 3 PM

November

- Complete analysis
- Draft report

Leadership caucus: November 13, 3 PM

Joint Work Team "Analysis Party:" November 13, 10 AM - 3 PM

December

- Complete and distribute report

Leadership caucus: December 11, 3 PM

If you want to complete the research by March 1, 2002

August

Form work team

Within the school community, publicize the intention to do the project, announce topic

Leadership caucus: August 28, 3 PM

Joint Work Team session: August 23, 10 AM - 3 PM

September

Begin developing the research questions and interview questions

Test interview questions either informally, formally, or both

Consider ideal participant mix

Leadership caucus: September 18, 3 PM

October

Make final decisions about research questions and interview questions

Make final decisions on ideal participant mix

Leadership caucus: October 16, 3 PM

Joint Work Team session: October 25, 10 AM - 3 PM

November

Work out logistics for focus group sessions

Leadership caucus: November 13, 3 PM

December

[Could recruit for pilot groups, get parental permissions, and conduct pilot groups here; requires training at least some facilitators before the year-end break and then refreshing the training with practice and coaching after the break]

Leadership caucus: December 11, 3 PM

January

- Identify, recruit, and get parental permission for student facilitators
- Train student facilitators
- Sponsor student facilitator practice sessions
- Draw sample and recruit student participants, and get parental permissions
- Run pilot groups and make necessary adjustments [if not completed in December]
- Run groups

Leadership caucus: January 8, 3 PM

Joint Work Team Session, January 8, 10 AM - 3 PM

February

- Produce transcripts or other written record
- Carry out analysis
- Draft report

Leadership caucus: February 12, 3 PM

Joint Work Team "Analysis Party:" February 12, 10 AM - 3 PM

March

- Complete and distribute report

Leadership caucus: March 5, 3 PM

FOCUS GROUP TOPICS CONSIDERED BY KENTUCKY STUDENTS

- P** Students' views on teaching and learning (two undisclosed middle schools and two undisclosed high schools [two rural, two urban, two high achieving, two low achieving])

- P** School safety and school climate (Jessamine County Schools, K-12)

- P** Cultural barriers to academic and social success (Morton Middle School, Fayette County)

- P** Narrowing the academic achievement gap between high-performing and low-performing students (Henry Clay High School, Fayette County)

- P** How administrators, teachers, and students can work together to close the achievement gap (Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, Fayette County)

- P** Reasons why students do or do not participate in technology programs (Eastside/Southside Centers for Applied Technology, Fayette County)

- P** Students' perceptions of the work they do for school (Jessamine County Schools, K-12)

- P** Students' ideas about a major building renovation and how to reduce problems associated with it (Morton Middle School, Fayette County)

- P** Reasons for poor high school attendance and ideas for improving attendance (West Jessamine High School, Jessamine County)

- P** How to ease transition from elementary to middle school, particularly for schools sending sixth graders to middle school for the first time (Boyle County)

Appendix D

Turn Up the Volume in Jefferson County, Fall 2001

The Confirmed Time Table for Noe and Westport Middle Schools

NOTE: All work to be completed by Design Teams in each Middle School, with support from Jefferson County Public Schools and the Partnership for Kentucky Schools

August

Form Design Teams in each school

Within each school community, publicize the intention to do the project; announce topic

Develop the research questions and interview questions

Leadership Caucus: Monday, August 27, 3 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

Joint Work Session: Wednesday, August 29, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Noe Middle School; 2 subs arranged for each school

September

Decide on ideal participant mix

Work out logistics for focus group sessions

Identify, recruit, and get parental permission for student facilitators;

Noe deadline: _____; Westport deadline: _____

Draw sample and recruit student participants, and get parental permissions

Noe deadline: _____; Westport deadline: _____

Train student facilitators: Dates: Noe: Friday, September 21; Wp: Thurs., September 27

Sponsor student facilitator practice sessions: Noe dates: _____

Westport dates: _____

Joint Work Session: Tuesday, September 11, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school

Leadership Caucus: Thursday, September 20, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

October

Run pilot groups, make necessary changes: Noe: Wed., 9/26; Westport, Tuesday, 10/2, 9 AM

Run all groups: Noe dates: Wed/Thur, 10/3 - 10/4; Westport dates: Tue/Wed, October 9 - 10

Hold facilitator debriefing session: Joint or separate? Dates? _____

Produce transcripts or other written record

Begin analysis

Leadership Caucus: Thursday, October 18, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3D

November

Complete analysis

Draft report

Joint Work Session: Analysis Party: Tuesday, November 6, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school

Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, November 14, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

December

Complete and distribute report: Noe deadline: December 7; Westport deadline: December 7

Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, December 12, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

Appendix E

Noe Middle School and Westport Middle School August 29, 2001 Joint Work Session for Design Teams Agenda

Purpose: To equip people from Noe and Westport to plan and carry out useful, high quality student focus groups on important questions relating to improving school and student performance.

8:00 AM Refreshments

8:30 AM Welcome, purpose, introductions, conversation guidelines

What are student focus groups? A demonstration

The demonstration *Research Question*: What would it take to make learning at Noe and Westport Middle Schools so fun and interesting that both students and adults would rather be at school than anywhere else?

Break

Why do focus groups? Short tales from other schools

How will you do your focus groups at Noe and Westport? Planning, part 1: Items 1 - 5 or 6 on Checklist (see page 6 of this handout)

11:30 AM Working Lunch

12:15 PM Planning for your focus groups, part 2: Items 9, 11, 13, 14, 15 on Checklist; then items 6, 7, 8, 10, and 12 (Some will be “homework”)

1:30 Adjourn

Proposed Conversation Guidelines

1. Work together to make something new and valuable today.
2. Speak when you have good ideas.
3. Listen to understand others' ideas.
4. Suggest ways to combine and improve ideas.
5. Use basic courtesy.
6. Use raised hands to help quiet the room when a single speaker needs to be heard

Why focus groups?

What do focus groups produce that you can't get some other way?

- C New information about strategies to improve teaching, learning, school climate and school safety
- C People's own words and ideas, not their responses to what others have pre-digested for them

The Bottom Line = **Confidence**
for making good decisions

Examples:

How schools have used focus group research info

Jessamine County, all grades:

- C How to improve students' sense of safety
- C How to improve the work students are given to do

Boyle County Middle School:

- C How to improve the transition from elementary to middle school

See list on Toolkit page 168

“Where in the *Toolkit...*”
Locating Key components
for Noe and Westport, Fall 2001

1. About focus groups, 4
2. Overall outline, 13
3. Timetable, 15-16
4. Precise “how to,” pages 21 - 152
5. What have other schools studied using focus groups? 168
6. Contact information for Rona, page i
7. Example of a complete focus group report,
Students Speak About School Climate and School Safety in Jessamine County, in back pocket
8. Bibliography of more sources regarding direct student participation in school improvement, page 197

Turn Up the Volume 2001
Noe and Westport Middle Schools

C H E C K L I S T

1. Identify your research topic (Toolkit page 21)

2. Form a Design Team (page 21)

3. Designate a project manager (page 25) _____

4. Draft a rough timetable (page 26 in Toolkit). (*See page 13 of this handout.*)

5. Clarify the aims of the research and draft one (preferred) to three research questions (page 32)
 - A. _____

 - B. _____

 - C. _____

6. Make decisions about focus group structure (page 34)

Population (page 34) _____

How many groups? (page 35) From three to ten (See question 7 before deciding)

Homogeneous (recommended) or heterogeneous (page 35) _____

How many in each group (six to eight) (page 35) _____

Best times/places to conduct groups (page 38) _____

Will you offer incentives? (page 40) No ___ Yes ___ What? _____ Who will buy/manage the incentives? _____

7. Identify the types of students to recruit for each group (page 41), based on your research question

A. Kinds of diversity among students in your school (page 41)

B. Kinds of diversity that might make a difference in student views on your research topic (page 42)

C. Kinds of diversity that matter that can be determined easily and legally (page 43)

D. Are there any students who need to be excluded from the research (page 43)

8. Make decisions about the logistics of the recruitment of student participants (page 46)

A. How many students will you recruit to get your target number for each group (page 46)

B. Who has legal access to complete database of students and will draw the random sample (page 46)

C. How much information will come from the database, and will students have to answer additional questions to determine if they fit the research profile (page 47)

D. Who will screen students, if screening is necessary (page 47)

E. How will you explain the *Turn Up the Volume* focus groups to potential student participants (page 47)

F. Who will manage drafting the permission forms and getting parents to sign (pages 51 - 55)

G. Set dates for drawing the sample, explaining participation, and sending home permission forms (page 56)

H. Designate someone to collect signed permission forms (page 56)

I. Determine if confirmation letters or calls are necessary, and, if so, who will do them (page 56)

9. Draft and revise interview questions (pages 57 - 68) (no more than 6 major interview questions total) (Also see Appendix D, pages 169 - 177)

Research Question A (from question 5): _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Research Question B (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Research Question C (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

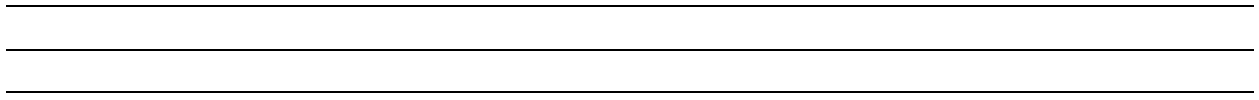
10. Make decisions about focus group facilitation (page 70, pages 73 - 75)

11. Plan facilitator training (page 79) (We're doing this for you this year; need to set dates)

Date: _____

12. Make decisions about facilitator logistics (pages 80 - 84; checklist 4 on page 93)

Who will manage the facilitator components (also see pages 116 - 120)



Logistics Team

1. Name the members of the Logistics Team (page 95):

2. Clarify responsibilities (page 98; checklists on pages 92 - 93)
3. Draw a random sample (pages 103 - 115); school or Central Office data people often can do this, if they have exact specifications.

And check out all the tasks under "Act" in the Toolkit (pages 95 - 126) to make sure you have everything covered.

Analysis and Report (Writing) Team

1. Name the people who will do analysis on November 6

2. Name the report writer

And check out the "Analyze and Report" section of the Toolkit (pages 127 - 152) to make sure you have ways to cover all the analytical tasks, and get all the learning from the groups, facilitators, and adult assistants.

Turn Up the Volume in Jefferson County, Fall 2001
The Confirmed Time Table for Noe and Westport Middle Schools

NOTE: All work to be completed by Design Teams in each Middle School, with support from Jefferson County Public Schools and the Partnership for Kentucky Schools

August

Form Design Teams in each school
Within each school community, publicize the intention to do the project; announce topic
Develop the research questions and interview questions

Leadership Caucus: Monday, August 27, 3 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C
Joint Work Session: Wednesday, August 29, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Noe Middle School; 2 subs arranged for each school

September

Decide on ideal participant mix
Work out logistics for focus group sessions
Identify, recruit, and get parental permission for student facilitators;
Noe deadline: _____; Westport deadline: _____
Draw sample and recruit student participants, and get parental permissions
Noe deadline: _____; Westport deadline: _____
Train student facilitators: Date: _____
Sponsor student facilitator practice sessions: Noe dates: _____
Westport dates: _____

Joint Work Session: Tuesday, September 11, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school
Leadership Caucus: Thursday, September 20, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

October

Run pilot groups, make necessary changes
Run all groups: Noe dates: _____; Westport dates: _____
Hold facilitator debriefing session: Joint or separate? Dates?

Produce transcripts or other written record
Begin analysis

Leadership Caucus: Thursday, October 18, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3D

November

Complete analysis
Draft report

Joint Work Session: Analysis Party: Tuesday, November 6, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school
Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, November 14, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

December

Complete and distribute report: Noe deadline: _____ Westport deadline:

Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, December 12, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

Appendix F

Noe Middle School and Westport Middle School

August 29, 2001

Joint Work Session for Design Teams

Facilitator's Agenda

Purpose: To equip people from Noe and Westport to plan and carry out useful, high quality student focus groups on important questions relating to improving school and student performance.

8:00 AM Refreshments

8:30 AM Welcome, purpose, introductions

Purpose: To equip people from Noe and Westport to plan and carry out useful, high quality student focus groups on important questions relating to improving school and student performance

To give you confidence and make sure you have fun doing this

To answer the Big Questions:

- < What
- < Why
- < How
- < When
- < Where
- < Who

Introductions: Human spectrums, with names and schools repeated

- > birthday
- > shirt/blouse/top color (light to dark, then alternating)
- > time of day of peak performance ??

Proposed Conversation Guidelines:

1. Work together to make something new and valuable today.
2. Speak when you have good ideas.
3. Listen to understand others' ideas.
4. Suggest ways to combine and improve ideas.
5. Use basic courtesy.

8:50 Modeled Focus Group:

- < Draw Random Sample and Alternates
Slots: 3 females, 3 males; 3 students, 3 adults; at least two from
each school

[fix this Tuesday]

Include permission to tape, fake permission slips

Modeled Focus Group Questions, Noe and Westport Middle Schools
Fall, 2001

Research Question: What would it take to make learning at Noe and Westport Middle Schools so fun and interesting that both students and adults would rather be at school than anywhere else?

Intro material:

Experience with focus groups? Fun

Goal is not agreement or consensus, it's discovery of variety of opinions and views

Tape recorder okay?

Rules of engagement:

I'll ask questions and watch the time — I'm working from a set of instructions produced by the sponsors of this research

Aim is greatest possible expression by everybody

Please speak for yourself

Please listen as others speak and encourage them to put their good ideas out

Confidentiality provisions

Okay?

Intro: Favorite after school snack

Interview Questions:

1. What has been the best day of school so far this year?

2. What made it good? [introduce toys/objects] Use this toy as an idea starter. How was your good day at school like something about this toy?
3. [If needed] What was the best “learning moment” so far [a time when you knew you were learning something and you were loving it]?
4. What would it take to have more great learning moments at Noe and Westport? [write down first, share one item around, then another and another]
5. What one big change do you wish others would make so your school would be the best place to be every single day?
6. What one big change would you need to make yourself so that you are learning and enjoying school more than you’d enjoy any other place?
7. Do you have any suggestions for the people who organize learning activities at Noe and Westport Middle Schools about how they can make these schools the most interesting places to be and learn every day? [Draw on green paper a picture of what you’d like to see happen at your school every day to make it the greatest place to be and learn. Draw on pink paper a picture of the things that need to be changed at your school to make it the greatest place to be and learn every day.]

Thanks, etc.

What would it take to have more great learning moments at school?

Circle the ideas you like. Draw a line through the ideas you don't like.

More projects that take students out into the community

More field trips

More friendly teachers

More projects that end up with us producing plays, or music, or other performances

More detailed worksheets

More team projects

New kinds of homework

More assignments that require using magazines and newspapers

More clubs that help with learning certain subjects

More projects for me alone, not as part of a team

More big projects the whole class can do together

More assignments that are like real life and real work

More videos

More books we read on our own

More projects that include my family, if they want to help

More frequent tests so I'll know how I'm doing

More memorizing facts or dates

9:45 Questions and application of the focus group to what you will be doing

- < I was operating within a research question framework
- < I used interview questions and techniques, not the research question itself, to get people talking and revealing
- < I got my participants through random sampling
- < I had them complete permission slips, and got their permission to tape
- < I stayed neutral, finding it all interesting

10:00 Break

10:10 Why? What do focus groups add that you can't get some other way?

[overhead]

New information about strategies to improve teaching, learning, school climate and school safety

People's own words and ideas, not their responses to what others have pre-digested for them

Confidence

[overhead]

Jessamine County: How to improve students' sense of safety

Boyle County: How to improve the transition from elementary to middle school

What's in the *Toolkit*? [overhead]

1. About focus groups, 4
2. Overall outline, 13
3. Timetable, 15-16
4. Precise "how to," pages 21 - 152
5. What have other schools studied using focus groups? 168

6. Contact information for Rona, page i
7. Example of a complete focus group report, *Students Speak About School Climate and School Safety in Jessamine County*, in back pocket

10:25 How? Getting to work to plan your *Turn Up the Volume* research

What we will do today: [check out your handouts, page 5]

Before lunch: Planning, part 1: Items 1 - 5 or 6 on Checklist (see page 2)

During lunch: Start on 9

After lunch: Finish 9, do 11, 13, 14, 15 on Checklist; then items 6, 7, 8, 10, and 12

NOW FOLLOW CHECKLIST

Turn Up the Volume 2001
Noe and Westport Middle Schools

C H E C K L I S T

1. Identify your research topic (page 21)

2. Form a Design Team (page 21)

3. Designate a project manager (page 25) _____

4. Draft a rough timetable (page 26 in Toolkit). (See page 12 of this handout)

5. Clarify the aims of the research and draft one (preferred) to three research questions (page 32)
 - A. _____

 - B. _____

 - C. _____

6. Make decisions about focus group structure (page 34)

Population (page 34) _____

How many groups? (page 35) From three to ten (See question 7 before deciding)

Homogeneous (recommended) or heterogeneous (page 35) _____

How many in each group (six to eight) (page 35) _____

Best times/places to conduct groups (page 38) _____

Will you offer incentives? (page 40) No ___ Yes ___ What? _____ Who will buy/manage the incentives? _____

7. Identify the types of students to recruit for each group (page 41), based on your research question

A. Kinds of diversity among students in your school (page 41)

B. Kinds of diversity that might make a difference in student views on your research topic (page 42)

C. Kinds of diversity that matter that can be determined easily and legally (page 43)

D. Are there any students who need to be excluded from the research (page 43)

8. Make decisions about the logistics of the recruitment of student participants (page 46)

A. How many students will you recruit to get your target number for each group (page 46)

B. Who has legal access to complete database of students and will draw the random sample (page 46)

C. How much information will come from the database, and will students have to answer additional questions to determine if they fit the research profile (page 47)

D. Who will screen students, if screening is necessary (page 47)

E. How will you explain the *Turn Up the Volume* focus groups to potential student participants (page 47)

F. Who will manage drafting the permission forms and getting parents to sign (pages 51 - 55)

G. Set dates for drawing the sample, explaining participation, and sending home permission forms (page 56)

H. Designate someone to collect signed permission forms (page 56)

I. Determine if confirmation letters or calls are necessary, and, if so, who will do them (page 56)

9. Draft and revise interview questions (pages 57 - 68) (no more than 6 major interview questions total) (Also see Appendix D, pages 169 - 177)

Research Question A (from question 5): _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Research Question B (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Research Question C (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

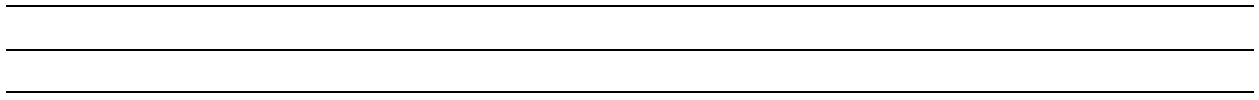
10. Make decisions about focus group facilitation (page 70, pages 73 - 75)

11. Plan facilitator training (page 79) (We're doing this for you this year; need to set dates)

Date: _____

12. Make decisions about facilitator logistics (pages 80 - 84; checklist 4 on page 93)

Who will manage the facilitator components (also see pages 116 - 120)



Logistics Team

1. Name the members of the Logistics Team (page 95):

2. Clarify responsibilities (page 98; checklists on pages 92 - 93)
3. Draw a random sample (pages 103 - 115); school or Central Office data people often can do this, if they have exact specifications.

And check out all the tasks under "Act" in the Toolkit (pages 95 - 126) to make sure you have everything covered.

Analysis and Report (Writing) Team

1. Name the people who will do analysis on November 6

2. Name the report writer

And check out the "Analyze and Report" section of the Toolkit (pages 127 - 152) to make sure you have ways to cover all the analytical tasks, and get all the learning from the groups, facilitators, and adult assistants.

Logistics Team

1. Name the members of the Logistics Team (page 95) — Today
2. Clarify responsibilities (page 98; checklists on pages 92 - 93) — Today
3. Draw a random sample (pages 103 - 115); school or Central Office data people often can do this, if they have exact specifications — talk about it today; complete after 9/11

And check out all the tasks under "Act" in the Toolkit (pages 95 - 126) to make sure you have everything covered.

Analysis and Report (Writing) Team

Name the people who will do analysis on November 6 — Today

Name the report writer — Today if possible

And check out the "Analyze and Report" section of the Toolkit (pages 127 - 152) to make sure you have ways to cover all the analytical tasks, and get all the learning from the groups, facilitators, and adult assistants.

Appendix G

Modeled Focus Group Questions, Noe and Westport Middle Schools Fall, 2001

Research Question: What would it take to make learning at Noe and Westport Middle Schools so fun and interesting that both students and adults would rather be at school than anywhere else?

Intro material:

Experience with focus groups? Fun

Goal is not agreement or consensus, it's discovery of variety of opinions and views

Tape recorder okay?

Rules of engagement:

I'll ask questions and watch the time — I'm working from a set of instructions produced by the sponsors of this research

Aim is greatest possible expression by everybody

Please speak for yourself

Please listen as others speak and encourage them to put their good ideas out

Confidentiality provisions

Okay?

Intro: Favorite after school snack

Interview Questions:

1. What has been the best day of school so far this year?
2. What made it good? [introduce toys/objects] Use this toy as an idea starter. How was your good day at school like something about this toy?
3. [If needed] What was the best "learning moment" so far [a time when you knew you were

learning something and you were loving it]?

4. What would it take to have more great learning moments at Noe and Westport? [On prepared page, circle items that have appeal; mark through items that are unappealing. (See next page.)]
5. What one big change do you wish others would make so your school would be the best place to be every single day?
6. What one big change would you need to make yourself so that you are learning and enjoying school more than you'd enjoy any other place?
7. Do you have any suggestions for the people who organize learning activities at Noe and Westport Middle Schools about how they can make these schools the most interesting places to be and learn every day? [Draw on green paper a picture of what you'd like to see happen at your school every day to make it the greatest place to be and learn. Draw on pink paper a picture of the things that need to be changed at your school to make it the greatest place to be and learn every day.]

Thanks, etc.

What would it take to have more great learning moments at school?

Circle the ideas you like. Draw a line through the ideas you don't like.

More projects that take students out into the community

More field trips

More friendly teachers

More projects that end up with us producing plays, or music, or other performances

More detailed worksheets

More team projects

New kinds of homework

More assignments that require using magazines and newspapers

More clubs that help with learning certain subjects

More projects for me alone, not as part of a team

More big projects the whole class can do together

More assignments that are like real life and real work

More videos

More books we read on our own

More projects that include my family, if they want to help

More frequent tests so I'll know how I'm doing

More memorizing facts or dates

C H E C K L I S T

1. Identify your research topic (page 21) _____

2. Form a Design Team (page 21) _____

3. Designate a project manager (page 25) _____

4. Draft a rough timetable (page 26). (See attachment)

5. Clarify the aims of the research and draft one (preferred) to three research questions (page 32)

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

6. Make decisions about focus group structure (page 34)

Population (page 34) _____

How many groups? (page 35) From three to ten (See question 7 before deciding)

Homogeneous (recommended) or heterogeneous (page 35) _____

How many in each group (six to eight) (page 35) _____

Best times/places to conduct groups (page 38) _____

Will you offer incentives? (page 40) No ___ Yes ___ What? _____ Who will buy/manage the incentives? _____

7. Identify the types of students to recruit for each group (page 41), based on your research question

A. Kinds of diversity among students in your school (page 41)_____

B. Kinds of diversity that might make a difference in student views on your research topic (page 42) _____

C. Kinds of diversity that matter that can be determined easily and legally (page 43)_____

D. Are there any students who need to be excluded from the research (page 43) _____

8. Make decisions about the logistics of the recruitment of student participants (page 46)

A. How many students will you recruit to get your target number for each group (page 46)

B. Who has legal access to complete database of students and will draw the random sample (page 46) _____

C. How much information will come from the database, and will students have to answer additional questions to determine if they fit the research profile (page 47) _____

D. Who will screen students, if screening is necessary (page 47) _____

E. How will you explain the *Turn Up the Volume* focus groups to potential student participants (page 47) _____

F. Who will manage drafting the permission forms and getting parents to sign (pages 51 - 55) _____

G. Set dates for drawing the sample, explaining participation, and sending home permission forms (page 56) _____

H. Designate someone to collect signed permission forms (page 56) _____

I. Determine if confirmation letters or calls are necessary, and, if so, who will do them (page 56) _____

9. Draft and revise interview questions (pages 57 - 68) (no more than 6 major interview questions total) (Also see Appendix D, pages 169 - 177)

Research Question A (from question 5): _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Research Question B (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Research Question C (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

10. Make decisions about focus group facilitation (page 70, pages 73 - 75) _____

11. Plan facilitator training (page 79)

Date: _____

12. Make decisions about facilitator logistics (pages 80 - 84; checklist 4 on page 93)

Who will manage the facilitator components (also see pages 116 - 120)

Who will handle facilitator recruitment? _____

Who will handle contacting parents and getting permission slips? _____

Will you have facilitators sign agreements? No__ Yes __ Who will handle? _____

Who will confirm facilitator dates/times and make sure they are present _____

Logistics Team

Name the members of the Logistics Team (page 95): _____

2. Clarify responsibilities (page 98; checklists on pages 92 - 93)
3. Draw a random sample (pages 103 - 115); school or Central Office data people often can do this, if they have exact specifications.

And check out all the tasks under "Act" in the Toolkit (pages 95 - 126) to make sure you have everything covered.

Analysis and Report (Writing) Team

Name the people who will do analysis on November 6 _____

Name the report writer _____

And check out the "Analyze and Report" section of the Toolkit (pages 127 - 152) to make sure you have ways to cover all the analytical tasks, and get all the learning from the groups, facilitators, and adult assistants.

Turn Up the Volume in Jefferson County, Fall 2001
The Confirmed Time Table for Noe and Westport Middle Schools

NOTE: All work to be completed by Design Teams in each Middle School, with support from Jefferson County Public Schools and the Partnership for Kentucky Schools

August

Form Design Teams in each school
Within each school community, publicize the intention to do the project; announce topic
Develop the research questions and interview questions

Leadership Caucus: Monday, August 27, 3 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C
Joint Work Session: Wednesday, August 29, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Noe Middle School; 2 subs arranged for each school

September

Decide on ideal participant mix
Work out logistics for focus group sessions
Identify, recruit, and get parental permission for student facilitators;
Noe deadline: _____; Westport deadline: _____
Draw sample and recruit student participants, and get parental permissions
Noe deadline: _____; Westport deadline: _____
Train student facilitators: Date: _____
Sponsor student facilitator practice sessions: Noe dates: _____
Westport dates: _____

Joint Work Session: Tuesday, September 11, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school
Leadership Caucus: Thursday, September 20, 3 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

October

Run pilot groups, make necessary changes
Run all groups: Noe dates: _____; Westport dates: _____
Hold facilitator debriefing session: Joint or separate? Dates?

Produce transcripts or other written record
Begin analysis

Leadership Caucus: Thursday, October 18, 3 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3D

November

Complete analysis
Draft report

Joint Work Session: ?Analysis Party:? Tuesday, November 6, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to

be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school

Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, November 14, 3 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

December

Complete and distribute report: Noe deadline: _____

Westport deadline: _____

Appendix I

Noe Middle School and Westport Middle School
September 11, 2001
Joint Work Session for Design Teams
Agenda

Purpose: To equip people from Noe and Westport to plan and carry out useful, high quality student focus groups on important questions relating to improving school and student performance.

8:00 AM Refreshments

8:30 AM Welcome, purpose, introductions, conversation guidelines

How about those Research Questions and Interview Questions?

Big Plans: Answering the *How* questions about planning and managing your focus groups

Items 4, 6, and 7 on the Checklist

Break

Big Plans, continued: Items 8, 10, 12 on the Checklist

11:30 AM Working Lunch

12:15 PM Big Plans -- Last Chance!!: Items 13, 14, and 15 on Checklist

1:30 Adjourn

Proposed Conversation Guidelines

1. Work together to make something new and valuable today.
2. Speak when you have good ideas.
3. Listen to understand others' ideas.
4. Suggest ways to combine and improve ideas.
5. Use basic courtesy.
6. Use raised hands to help quiet the room when a single speaker needs to be heard

Why focus groups?

What do focus groups produce that you can't get some other way?

- C New information about strategies to improve teaching, learning, school climate and school safety
- C People's own words and ideas, not their responses to what others have pre-digested for them

The Bottom Line = **Confidence**
for making good decisions

Examples:

How schools have used focus group research info

Jessamine County, all grades:

- C How to improve students' sense of safety
- C How to improve the work students are given to do

Boyle County Middle School:

- C How to improve the transition from elementary to middle school

See list on Toolkit page 168

“Where in the *Toolkit...*”
Locating Key components
for Noe and Westport, Fall 2001

1. About focus groups, 4
2. Overall outline, 13
3. Timetable, 15-16
4. Precise “how to,” pages 21 - 152
5. What have other schools studied using focus groups? 168
6. Contact information for Rona, page i
7. Example of a complete focus group report,
Students Speak About School Climate and School Safety in Jessamine County, in back pocket
8. Bibliography of more sources regarding direct student participation in school improvement, page 197

Turn Up the Volume 2001
Noe and Westport Middle Schools

C H E C K L I S T

1. Identify your research topic (Toolkit page 21)

2. Form a Design Team (page 21)

3. Designate a project manager (page 25) _____

4. Draft a rough timetable (page 26 in Toolkit). (*See page 13 of this handout.*)

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9. Draft and revise interview questions (pages 57 - 68) (no more than 6 major interview questions total) (Also see Appendix D, pages 169 - 177)

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1. _____

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Research Question B (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

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3. _____

Research Question C (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

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3. _____

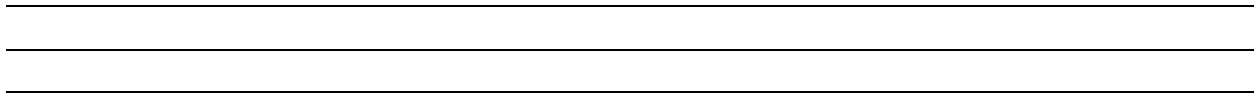
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Who will manage the facilitator components (also see pages 116 - 120)



Logistics Team

1. Name the members of the Logistics Team (page 95):

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And check out all the tasks under "Act" in the Toolkit (pages 95 - 126) to make sure you have everything covered.

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1. Name the people who will do analysis on November 6

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Turn Up the Volume in Jefferson County, Fall 2001
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October

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Run all groups: Noe dates: _____; Westport dates: _____
Hold facilitator debriefing session: Joint or separate? Dates?

Produce transcripts or other written record
Begin analysis

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November

Complete analysis
Draft report

Joint Work Session: Analysis Party: Tuesday, November 6, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school
Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, November 14, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

December

Complete and distribute report: Noe deadline: _____ Westport deadline:

Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, December 12, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

Appendix J

Noe Middle School and Westport Middle School
September 11, 2001
Joint Work Session for Design Teams
Facilitator's Agenda

Purpose: To equip people from Noe and Westport to plan and carry out useful, high quality student focus groups on important questions relating to improving school and student performance.

8:00 AM Refreshments

8:30 AM Welcome, purpose, introductions

Purpose: To equip people from Noe and Westport to plan and carry out useful, high quality student focus groups on important questions relating to improving school and student performance

To give you confidence and make sure you have fun doing this

To answer the Big Questions:

- < What
- < Why
- < How
- < When
- < Where
- < Who

Introductions: Human spectrums, with names and schools repeated

- > birthday
- > shirt/blouse/top color (light to dark, then alternating)
- > time of day of peak performance ??

Proposed Conversation Guidelines

1. Work together to make something new and valuable today.
2. Speak when you have good ideas.
3. Listen to understand others' ideas.
4. Suggest ways to combine and improve ideas.
5. Use basic courtesy.
6. Use raised hands to help quiet the room when a single speaker needs to be heard

9:15 Research Questions/Interview Questions: What has happened so far?

> Invite improvements, using the toy box

9:45 Break

10:00 Items 4, 6, and 7 on the Checklist

Items 8, 10, 12 on the Checklist

11:30 Working Lunch

12:15 Big Plans -- Last Chance!!: Items 13, 14, and 15 on Checklist

1:00 Worries, concerns, questions

1:30 Adjourn

Turn Up the Volume 2001
Noe and Westport Middle Schools

C H E C K L I S T

1. Identify your research topic (page 21)

2. Form a Design Team (page 21)

3. Designate a project manager (page 25) _____

4. Draft a rough timetable (page 26 in Toolkit). (See page 12 of this handout)

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 - A. _____

 - B. _____

 - C. _____

6. Make decisions about focus group structure (page 34)

Population (page 34) _____

How many groups? (page 35) From three to ten (See question 7 before deciding)

Homogeneous (recommended) or heterogeneous (page 35) _____

How many in each group (six to eight) (page 35) _____

Best times/places to conduct groups (page 38) _____

Will you offer incentives? (page 40) No ___ Yes ___ What? _____ Who will buy/manage the incentives? _____

7. Identify the types of students to recruit for each group (page 41), based on your research question

A. Kinds of diversity among students in your school (page 41)

B. Kinds of diversity that might make a difference in student views on your research topic (page 42)

C. Kinds of diversity that matter that can be determined easily and legally (page 43)

D. Are there any students who need to be excluded from the research (page 43)

8. Make decisions about the logistics of the recruitment of student participants (page 46)

A. How many students will you recruit to get your target number for each group (page 46)

B. Who has legal access to complete database of students and will draw the random sample (page 46)

C. How much information will come from the database, and will students have to answer additional questions to determine if they fit the research profile (page 47)

D. Who will screen students, if screening is necessary (page 47)

E. How will you explain the *Turn Up the Volume* focus groups to potential student participants (page 47)

F. Who will manage drafting the permission forms and getting parents to sign (pages 51 - 55)

G. Set dates for drawing the sample, explaining participation, and sending home permission forms (page 56)

H. Designate someone to collect signed permission forms (page 56)

I. Determine if confirmation letters or calls are necessary, and, if so, who will do them (page 56)

9. Draft and revise interview questions (pages 57 - 68) (no more than 6 major interview questions total) (Also see Appendix D, pages 169 - 177)

Research Question A (from question 5): _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Research Question B (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Research Question C (from question 5) _____

Interview Questions:

1. _____

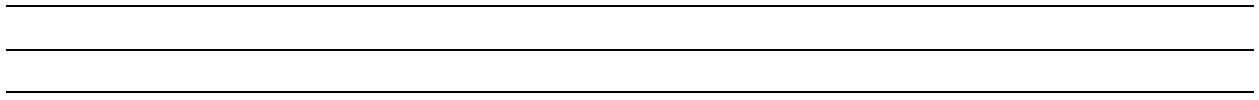
2. _____

3. _____

10. Make decisions about focus group facilitation (page 70, pages 73 - 75)

11. Plan facilitator training (page 79) (We're doing this for you this year; need to set dates)
Date: _____

12. Make decisions about facilitator logistics (pages 80 - 84; checklist 4 on page 93)
Who will manage the facilitator components (also see pages 116 - 120)
Who will handle facilitator recruitment? _____



Logistics Team

1. Name the members of the Logistics Team (page 95):

2. Clarify responsibilities (page 98; checklists on pages 92 - 93)
3. Draw a random sample (pages 103 - 115); school or Central Office data people often can do this, if they have exact specifications.

And check out all the tasks under "Act" in the Toolkit (pages 95 - 126) to make sure you have everything covered.

Analysis and Report (Writing) Team

1. Name the people who will do analysis on November 6

2. Name the report writer

And check out the "Analyze and Report" section of the Toolkit (pages 127 - 152) to make sure you have ways to cover all the analytical tasks, and get all the learning from the groups, facilitators, and adult assistants.

Logistics Team

1. Name the members of the Logistics Team (page 95) — Today
2. Clarify responsibilities (page 98; checklists on pages 92 - 93) — Today
3. Draw a random sample (pages 103 - 115); school or Central Office data people often can do this, if they have exact specifications — talk about it today; complete after 9/11

And check out all the tasks under "Act" in the Toolkit (pages 95 - 126) to make sure you have everything covered.

Analysis and Report (Writing) Team

Name the people who will do analysis on November 6 — Today

Name the report writer — Today if possible

And check out the "Analyze and Report" section of the Toolkit (pages 127 - 152) to make sure you have ways to cover all the analytical tasks, and get all the learning from the groups, facilitators, and adult assistants.

Turn Up the Volume in Jefferson County, Fall 2001
The Confirmed Time Table for Noe and Westport Middle Schools

NOTE: All work to be completed by Design Teams in each Middle School, with support from Jefferson County Public Schools and the Partnership for Kentucky Schools

August

Form Design Teams in each school
Within each school community, publicize the intention to do the project; announce topic
Develop the research questions and interview questions

Leadership Caucus: Monday, August 27, 3 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C
Joint Work Session: Wednesday, August 29, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Noe Middle School; 2 subs arranged for each school

September

Decide on ideal participant mix
Work out logistics for focus group sessions
Identify, recruit, and get parental permission for student facilitators;
Noe deadline: _____; Westport deadline: _____
Draw sample and recruit student participants, and get parental permissions
Noe deadline: _____; Westport deadline: _____
Train student facilitators: Date: _____
Sponsor student facilitator practice sessions: Noe dates: _____
Westport dates: _____

Joint Work Session: Tuesday, September 11, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school
Leadership Caucus: Thursday, September 20, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

October

Run pilot groups, make necessary changes
Run all groups: Noe dates: _____; Westport dates: _____
Hold facilitator debriefing session: Joint or separate? Dates?

Produce transcripts or other written record
Begin analysis

Leadership Caucus: Thursday, October 18, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3D

November

Complete analysis
Draft report

Joint Work Session: Analysis Party: Tuesday, November 6, 8:30 AM - 2:30 PM, Place to be determined; 2 subs arranged for each school
Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, November 14, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

December

Complete and distribute report: Noe deadline: _____ Westport deadline:

Leadership Caucus: Wednesday, December 12, 3:15 PM, VanHoose Conference Room 3C

Appendix K

Noe Middle School Jefferson County, Kentucky

Student Focus Groups on Increasing the Involvement of Parents
Who are in Noe's Area
Fall, 2001

Facilitators' Guide

This Guide includes these things:

- C Directions for opening your focus group
- C The full set of questions you will ask participants, p. 8
- C Hints for follow-up questions, p. 7
- C A way to keep track of time so you spend about the right amount of time on each question

Explanation of time tracking:

Starting on page 8, next to each question you will notice a space for the *elapsed time* and the *clock time*.

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

The clock time indicates the actual time, such as 9:45 AM or 10:30 AM. You will need to fill in the clock time for your focus group session, with the first entry on page 2 being your focus group starting time. Then you fill in the rest of the clock time blanks by adding time to your starting time. For example, on Question Two, the elapsed time is 20 minutes. If your session started at 9:30, then your real time here will be 9:50. This means that by 9:50 you should be starting Question Two.

Outline Version

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: getting parents more involved at Noe so the school climate and student performance will be even better..
- ! Check verbally on comfort: temperature, refreshments, any needed materials.
- ! Introduce yourselves and your titles (“*We’ll be your facilitators*” or “*We’ll be guiding the conversation.*”). Don’t give personal details that could sway people’s opinions.
- ! 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 one thing you really like to do?”* or something else] Ask people to write their names on the table cards provided.
- ! Explain that this is one of ___ groups with students that will lead to a report to be produced in December.
- ! State the ending time for the session: _____
- ! Explain the nature of the discussion.

It is aimed at getting a lot of information in short amount of time.

It is very structured.

The facilitator is fully in charge of pace (participants can relax.)

- ! Remind people about audio taping (they must have agreed to this before signing up for the session.)
- ! Explain the way in which 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.
- ! (Optional) Ask group members after the session to separate other people's names and views when they talk about the session.
- ! Emphasize that all comments and opinions are right and valued. You will not be asking questions that have wrong answers.
- ! The purpose of the session is to see how many opinions there are about each topic. The purpose is not to reach consensus 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 sponsor needs to know.

- ! 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 8 for the questions.]

Follow this version if you prefer to read from the text.

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

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

Thank you for coming today. We very much appreciate your taking the time to participate. The general focus of our session will be on ways to get our parents more involved in activities at Noe. The reason for the focus groups is to develop new ideas for involving parents, because great schools have lots of parent involvement, a better school climate, and better test scores.

Please help yourself to refreshments, and let me know if there is anything else you need. I am _____ and I will be the facilitator for this session. My co-facilitator is _____.

I'd like to go around now and have you introduce yourselves. Please tell us your name and _____ [”your favorite food”or “one thing that you really like to do” or something else simple and fun]

We will be finishing by _____ .

We will be having a discussion that is aimed at getting a lot of information in a short amount of time. I and my co-facilitator will guide the discussion, so you can just relax and participate. Similar sessions are being conducted with ___ other groups at Noe.

Let me remind you that the conversation will be audiotaped. We do this only for analysis, so we can review the conversation in detail and we don't have to remember or take notes. 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. After the session, a transcript is made from the audiotape. This is to protect your privacy. We ask that each of

you also hold each other's opinions in confidence. It's okay to talk about anything that is said here, so long as you don't attach someone's name to the idea or opinion.

All comments and opinions are right and valued. There are no wrong answers to the questions. The purpose of the session is to see how many opinions there are about each topic. This group is deliberately made up of people with different experiences, so we are looking for lots of different views. The purpose is not to reach agreement or to persuade each other. So let me encourage you to share your ideas and opinions, no matter what opinions others in the group may hold.

As the facilitators we will be your guides, and if more than one person wants to talk, we will call on people in order. We'd like to have you speak one at a time, but if you all start talking at once we will help sort it all out and get it recorded for analysis.

We may occasionally rush some section of the discussion you find interesting, and may even have to interrupt some people to move on to new topics or new speakers. On the other hand, we may ask for more information from some people than you think is necessary. We'll worry about all of this, and be guided by what the sponsor needs to know.

We ask that you speak for yourselves, and not for other people, or for what most people think.

Those are our proposed guidelines. Does anybody have a problem with any of them?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Now go to page 8 for the questions.]

HINTS FOR FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

How ...

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 ...

When do you ...

How often do you...

Where do you ...

THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Elapsed time) 0:15

(Clock time) _____

Question 1: Here is a list of activities we have at Noe after school and during school. [Hand out the list.] Circle the activities that your parents, grandparents, or guardians attend at Noe Middle. The activities are listed above the line.

We will take these up in a few minutes, but you don't need to put your name on them. They can be anonymous.

[Wait until people seem to be finished.]

(Elapsed time) 0:20

(Clock time) _____

Question 2: Below the line there is a place for you to list those activities that you would like your parents, grandparents, or guardians to attend, if you were part of the activities. Please list as few or as many as you want.

[Wait until people seem to be finished.]

Possible follow up question:

C Tell us more about what makes you want your parents to be here for the events you circled.

[If needed, ask individual participants, “Tell me more,” or “Can you explain more about that?” Avoid asking too many follow-up questions to any one person, though, so you don’t make her or him feel uncomfortable.]

[Collect all the sheets from participants, and thank them for filling them out.]

(Elapsed time) 0:25

(Clock time) _____

Question 3: Imagine an activity you might like that Noe doesn’t offer right now, and tell us about a new event or activity that you would like your parents, grandparents, or guardians to attend.

Possible follow up questions:

- C What would make this fun for you?
- C What would make this fun for your parents, grandparents, or guardians?
- C What would help you get your parents, grandparents, and guardians to come to this new activity?

[If some of the students give very short answers, you can use some “spontaneous follow-up” questions like, “Tell us more about that,” or “Can you say more about what will make that fun for your grandparent?”]

(Elapsed time) 0:30

(Clock time) _____

Question 4: Maybe there are times when you don't want your parents, grandparents, and guardians at school. If that's true for you, please describe those times.

Possible follow up question:

- C What is the difference between times you do want your parents, grandparents, and guardians to come to school and times you don't want them to come?
- C Are there things Noe Middle School could do to make it easier for you when your parents, grandparents, and guardians come to school?

[Listen and watch for times when you can use spontaneous follow-up questions like "Can you say more about that?" and "Please tell us more."]

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

(Elapsed time) 0:35

(Clock time) _____

Question 5: If there is a time when you really want your parent, grandparent, or guardian to come to school, what would you do to try to persuade them to come?

Possible follow up question:

[Use spontaneous follow-ups, if appropriate, such as “Tell us more about that.”]

(Elapsed time) 0:40

(Clock time) _____

Question 6: What can you and other students do to get your parents to attend more events at Noe?

Possible follow up question:

C If you have some “secret strategies” that you think might help other students get their parents to come to events at school, would you please share them?

[Use spontaneous follow-ups as needed, for example, “Tell us more about how that works” or, as always, simply “Tell us more.”]

(Elapsed time) 0:45

(Clock time) _____

Question 7: What can the teachers and staff at Noe Middle do to get your parents, grandparents, and guardians to attend more events at Noe?

Possible follow up questions:

C Imagine the best thing Noe could possibly do to help you get your parents, grandparents, and guardians to come to school. What would that be?

[Use spontaneous follow-ups if they fit in. For example, once someone has offered an idea, you could ask “Tell us more about how that would make a difference with your parent/grandparent/guardian.”]

(Elapsed time) 0:50

(Clock time) _____

Question 8: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Possible follow up question:

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

[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) 1:00

(Clock time) _____

Thank people for coming, and say, “Goodbye.”

Analysis

ÈÈÈ

A framework of *neutrality*

- , What biases do I have that might get in the way — about a certain type of student, for example?

- , Am I including both positive and negative views in my analysis?

- , Have I been dismissing some views because I know the student who said them?

- , Am I being fair to views that are different from my own?

The purpose of analysis is to find the most accurate, defensible answers to the research questions:

Westport

RQ A: What type of classroom activities/experiences help students learn better?

RQ B: How can teachers' actions impact student learning?

RQ C: How could the school environment enhance student learning?

Noe

RQ A: What can Noe students do to get their parents more involved in/at school?

The Analysis Steps

[6. Act]

[5. Write]

4. Interpret

3. Describe

2. Sort into themes

1. Read, talk, understand

What makes interpretation valid?

> Support from focus group data

- , A thread or pattern that ran through more than one group's conversation: state how many groups, or how many students, using terms like *some*, *many*, *most*, *nearly all*, or *all*
- , Quote participants, sometimes from several groups, and use a consistent format for the source, something like "A Seventh Grade Male Student"

Appendix M

STUDENTS SPEAK ABOUT PARENT INVOLVEMENT AT NOE MIDDLE SCHOOL SUMMARY REPORT

With 1,200 students who speak at least 17 different native languages and participate in academic programs ranging from gifted and talented to special education, Noe Middle School is both the largest and most diverse middle grades community in Jefferson County. About half the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch subsidies, the federal government's measure of family poverty. Noe also attracts children from every zip code in the county, which gives the school a truly representative sample of Louisville's youth but also puts great distance between the school and some of its constituents.

One of the results of Noe's complex composition is inconsistent involvement and support from parents. The school tends to attract a high level of interest from parents whose children chose Noe because of its magnet or optional programs but limited attention from families who live within the school's attendance zones. Because the school population is evenly divided between those two groups, the number of people who are only marginally part of the Noe community is quite large.

Over the years, school leaders have tried different strategies for bridging the parent involvement gap, including conducting parent-teacher conferences in some of the public housing projects within Noe's assignment boundaries and combining informational sessions with student performances so parents would be more inclined to come to school.

Early in the 2001-2002 school year, Noe's Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSA) surveyed parents to find out why more weren't participating in traditional forms of school support, such as fundraisers and field trips. More than 250 parents returned the surveys. In general, they said they did not volunteer because of a lack of time, primarily because of conflicting work schedules. Some parents also said they were put off by the state's required criminal background check for all volunteers who work with children in schools.

The importance of parent involvement

Why all the concern about parent involvement? Research shows that when their parents are actively engaged in their education, children perform better in school. They get better grades, earn higher test scores, and feel more connected to the community. So in their continuing effort to improve achievement at Noe, school leaders quite naturally hope to capitalize on an important contributing factor.

When the opportunity to participate in the Students Speak project arose, Noe Principal Kathy Sayre signed the school up.

"I felt like this project would be an opportunity to find out what activities students were interested in and how we might get their parents involved," she said.

Sayre said the thrust of the Students Speak project – increasing parent involvement to help boost student achievement – is closely aligned with the goals of Noe's Consolidated Plan.

Students Speak helps schools identify concerns, gain new insights and make decisions that are more likely to benefit the children they are intended to help. Noe's Students Speak design team consisted of seven students -- representing most of the school's seventh- and eighth-grade teams -- two teachers, two parents, and one administrator. The group first met in September to learn about focus groups and to frame the research questions. Then, during several days in October, the students conducted the focus groups with their peers and, in early November, they discussed and summarized the results.

Noe's design team included:

Susie Bertram, 7 Challengers
Shea Hennessy, 8 Rockets
Brittany Lewis, 7 Challengers
Michael Meaux, 8 Rockets
Trey Trinnell, 8 Rockets
Torrence Williams, 7 Achievers
Amber Yocum, 8 Flyers
Adriana Thornton-Clark, teacher, 7 Seekers
Maddy Smith, teacher, 8 Rockets
Judy Staples, assistant principal
Holly Holland, parent, 8 Flyers
Maria Trinnell, parent, 8 Rockets

Pros and Cons

One of the real benefits of this process was the leadership ability it tapped in the students serving on the design team. Although they all are bright, capable, and responsible students, they may not otherwise earn recognition in a large school with many academic "stars." The Students Speak project gave them an opportunity to complete important and meaningful work for which they were honored at home and at school – through their peers seeing them in leadership roles and through an article in the school newsletter. Their confidence with the adults and with each other grew with each gathering of the Students Speak group. As a result of their involvement in this process, these emerging student leaders may be more likely to participate in other school activities, which in turn might inspire their parents to become more engaged in their children's education.

Rona Roberts, the Students Speak facilitator from Roberts & Kay Inc., called the Noe and Westport Middle School students "pioneers" because they represent the largest group of adolescents ever to be involved on the research design teams. The process has been "much richer" because of their participation, she said.

One of the limitations of the Students Speak process at Noe had to do with the answers school leaders were seeking. Because of the selected topic – parent involvement – the student focus groups could at best provide only second-hand information about the reasons why parents from Noe's attendance zones do not routinely interact with the school. Children *might* know why their parents don't show up for school events. In some cases, they said, they specifically ask them not to attend. But only by going directly to

parents will school leaders know for sure why involvement is not consistent among different parent groups.

The questions

Members of Noe’s design team, with guidance from Rona Roberts and feedback from Westport’s design team, identified eight questions they wanted the research to address. Students in each focus group were asked:

1. On a prepared worksheet, to circle the activities that their parents, grandparents, or guardians had attended at Noe
2. To list the activities they would *like* their parents or guardians to attend
3. To imagine an activity they might like that Noe doesn’t currently offer
4. If there are times when they don’t want your parents at school, to describe those times
5. If there is a time when they really want their parents at school, how do they persuade them to come
6. What can they and other students do to persuade parents to attend more events at Noe
7. What can teachers do to get parents to attend events at Noe
8. To mention anything else not already discussed

The design team conducted six focus groups, four with all girls and two with all boys. The students who participated in the focus groups all live in Noe’s attendance zones. Only seventh- and eighth-graders were selected because school leaders believed that sixth-graders were too new to the school community to be able to reflect deeply on the questions.

The answers

Rona Roberts, the Students Speak facilitator from Roberts & Kay Inc., said she found a lot of consistency in the responses from Noe’s student focus groups, which gives her confidence in the information they shared. Roberts said that “many of the comments seem obvious, but that’s okay” because they reflect students’ sentiments about the school. In general, she said, the Noe students:

- Seemed to make clear distinctions between what they want their parents to see at school and what they don’t. They want their parents to attend athletic and performance events – such as music or drama – but they usually do not want them to come to anything having to do with their grades in school or academic achievement. These comments might reflect the “look at me, don’t look at me” stance of adolescents who are testing the limits of their independence. However, the comments also might reflect the lack of pride students take in their learning and/or the typically negative feedback they receive from teachers and parents about their school work.
- Believe that their parents need stronger reasons and incentives to come to school events. Students indicated that traditional events, such as Open House and the Fall Festival, have become routine; parents who might

have attended these events in the past don't see a reason to continue attending similar activities.

Research Question 1: *On a prepared worksheet, circle the activities that your parents, grandparents, or guardians have attended at Noe.*

The surveys students completed revealed that parents of neighborhood children fall into three groups: Those who come to almost everything at school to which they are invited; those who come only to formal functions, such as an Open House or scheduled conferences with teachers; and those who never come.

Among the boys, very few said their parents attend multiple school events, particularly involving some sort of academic performance. This may be because the boys do not consider themselves good students, those who are likely to earn a spot on academic teams or to receive recognition for their schoolwork.

Overall, the girls indicated greater involvement from their parents, especially for formal functions such as conference days and musical performances.

Research Question 2: *List the activities you would like your parents or guardians to attend at Noe.*

Girls and boys seem interested in having their parents attend some athletic and visual arts events in which they participate. Yet, they believe their involvement and their parents' interest in coming to school would be higher if there were more clubs, activities, and sports offered in the afternoon. Specifically, the girls would like to have football and volleyball teams, more school dances, more field trips, and additional opportunities to participate in cheerleading and track.

"I'd want my mom to come on field trips so I could have someone to talk to," one girl reflected. "I'd want her to come to the Fall Festival so we could have fun together."

Another girl said: "The reason why I want my parents to come" to Open House and band performances "is because of the support they give."

Another girl said she would like her parents to watch her perform cheerleading routines during basketball games "because I want them to see some of my talents I can do."

Boys were more reticent in responding to this question, but they indicated a preference for having their parents attend athletic events, chorus performances, and Stars Club. They would like to see additional sports teams at school, particularly basketball, baseball, wrestling, karate, and dodge ball.

One boy said he wanted his parents to attend athletic events because his participation would "make my parents proud of me that I'm getting out there."

Another boy, reflecting his ambivalence about having his parents at school, said: "I think both of my parents could attend baseball, football. And I don't want them to attend any fighting because like every time Mom sees me get whapped, she might say something like I'm grounded for fighting."

Research Question 3: *Imagine an activity you might like that Noe doesn't currently offer.*

Elaborating on their previously expressed interest in having more after-school athletic events at Noe, boys and girls suggested starting intramural sports leagues to give additional students a chance to compete. For students whose parents only come to school when they get in trouble with teachers or administrators, after-school sports leagues would give them a chance to gain new skills, work with a team, and earn positive attention for something they're "good at." In addition, boys believe their parents would be more inclined to come to school to watch them in athletic events.

"They have to see who scores touchdowns," one boy said, frankly.

Another boy said his parents would want to watch him play "because I'm real good at sports, whenever I play."

What would make it fun for parents or guardians to attend?

"I don't know," one boy answered, "I guess just spending time with them, letting them, like, see me more or something."

Boys perceive that Noe sanctions more activities for girls. Boys said they would like to have soccer, football, basketball, baseball, wrestling, and boxing squads.

For their part, girls said they would like to participate in non-tackle football, tennis, and volleyball.

"Why can't we have a place to play?" one girl asked. "All sports should be legal for both boys and girls. Football ain't have to be just no boys' sport."

One girl said she would be more involved in school if Noe had a volleyball team. "Because if they had it, then I'd want to join it because I want to be involved in sports but that's the only sport I like to play."

Like boys, girls believe their parents would enjoy coming to school to watch them in athletic events.

"To see that I was participating in something," one girl said.

Research Question 4: *If there are times when you don't want your parents at school, describe those times.*

Students said they most want to avoid opportunities for public embarrassment. The greatest possibility of embarrassment, they sense, occurs in relation to academic events, such as "when I have low grades on my report card," one girl said.

Or during parent teacher conferences: "Because they find out stuff like your behavior. Because it don't really show that good on your report card. They find out why you having trouble in class and stuff."

"Well, when I want them to come there, is whenever I do something good and I want to show them that I did it," another girl explained. "When I don't want them there is when I did something or didn't do something and I don't want them to know it."

"She asks too many questions," one girl said about her mother.

Another girl said pointedly: "I don't want them at school. I don't want to get in trouble."

Boys seek to avoid the parental limelight during embarrassing moments, "like when I get my report card, I don't want my parents to see that." But in addition, they expressed concern about having their parents at school dances and field trips or any other time when they can check up on their interactions with friends.

“Like, when I ask out a girl, they always like, ‘She ain’t good enough for you,’” one boy said.

“I know, man,” one of his peers said supportively. “I don’t want them to embarrass me.”

And one boy said flatly: “I never want my parents to come to school.”

During one insightful interchange, a group of boys explained that, “It’s not fun when you have a parent bugging you. When there’s nobody to watch over you, you stop. You’ve got to make the right decisions. If a parent’s there, they’re always over your back, warning you.”

“Cause they always embarrass you somehow.”

“I know, because they’re always like, ‘Come here, hee, hee. He’s so pretty.’”

“Treat you like you’re two years old.”

“Here, brush your teeth. Your teeth are yellow.”

“Comb your hair. Put on your nice clothes.’ It’s like one nag after another.”

In addition to academic and social activities, boys do not want their parents to attend sporting events in which they do not excel. Again, this might reflect how unsuccessful these students feel in all aspects of their school life.

“You don’t want them to come and see you running and looking bad,” one boy said plaintively.

Another boy mimicked the likely response from his parents: “Oh, my son screwed up!”

Boys also perceive their parents’ public displays of support, however well intended, as demeaning if it calls attention to them individually and not as part of a team or group.

“I mean sometimes, if I was in a game and my parents come, they’d go, like, ‘Go you can do it! You can do it!’ And then you’d be humiliated in front of all of your friends.”

Research Question 5: If there is a time when you really want your parents at school, how do you persuade them to come?

When students really want their parents to come to school, they use different ways to persuade them.

“If I wanted my parents to come, I would say I would be the best kid ever,” one boy said.

Another boy, offering the flip side of the comments in Question 4 about only receiving negative attention in school, said he would “let my mom see that I’m actually in some activity instead of sitting home all day. And watching me have fun, too. She likes it when I am enjoying myself.”

“I know,” another student chimed in, “because when you want them to come, you’re like doing an activity that is fun for you. But when you don’t want them to come, you’re either in trouble or your report card’s coming out.”

Added another boy: “The only time I want my Mama to come is like when, either I have some kind of activity that I’m really good in, like art or singing or something like

that. Or when I'm going to Bowling Green because I'm in chorus and we're supposed to be going there for some singing."

Students suggested offering incentives, such as free food or prizes, to parents who attend school events.

"I would exaggerate," one boy said. "I would tell her that she'd get a thousand bucks if she'd come. Something like that."

"My parents wouldn't fall for a thousand bucks," responded another boy.

"Yeah," echoed another. "They're not that stupid."

"Tell them you're getting an award," suggested one boy.

Several students said their parents aren't able to come to school because of work conflicts, including having to work multiple jobs to keep the family afloat financially.

"My parents are barely home, so you know, they can't come," one boy said.

Comments from girls followed the same lines. Asked what strategies they could use to encourage more participation from their parents, one girl said, "I would say something like, 'If they didn't come, I'd never speak to them again.'"

"Yeah," another girl agreed. "Like, I would go in my room, slam the door and start crying."

One girl said her mother would respond to financial incentives. "Just tell them and see if she could get a day off from work. Ask her if she could get like, one of her days off when she gets paid and see if she can come then."

Another girl was somewhat fatalistic about the chances of involving more parents in school. "Everybody can't be there when you want them to be," she said. "If my mother comes, she comes. And if she doesn't, she's a very busy woman."

Research Question 6: What can you and other students do to persuade your parents to attend more events at Noe?

Asked to think collectively about what students could do to encourage parents to play a more active role in their education, the focus groups said they don't believe there is much interesting to share about school.

"I have no clue on that," one boy said honestly.

A girl noted darkly: "My mom doesn't have time for anything like that. She just sends me here."

Students also said their parents are suspicious when teachers try to get too chummy, particularly when their attitudes contrast with the way their children have described them.

"My mom told me to tell all the people to stop being real nice," one boy said. "Because you know how like your mom comes in and all the teachers are nice and stuff? And then when they're not there, they're all mean."

Some students said they would like to see representative students change roles with teachers for the day. "For one day the kids are the teachers and the teachers are the kids," a boy said, adding a pronoun reference that wasn't entirely clear. "They don't know how bad they're being."

The only specific advice they could offer had to do with strengthening friendships – for students and parents – which would help adults feel connected to the school.

“Like if your best friend, if he says his mom’s coming (to a school event), and you want your mom to meet his,” one boy suggested.

Another boy agreed: “So they’ll talk and then they’ll be friends and stuff. So they both come and then they talk.”

Staggered schedules might help parents working evening shifts, some students suggested.

“Probably one way I can get my parents to come is if they ever switched around their work hours,” one boy said.

Research Question 7: What can teachers do to get parents to attend events at Noe?

Could teachers do anything to prompt greater involvement from parents? Students encouraged their teachers to emphasize their positive interactions and accomplishments in school, not just their negative behaviors.

“They could tell good stuff about you,” one boy said, in a very telling remark.

“Send postcards home,” suggested one girl. “Because I’m telling you now, if they give me a piece of paper talking about these events at Noe Middle School and blah, blah happening this day, my parents will not find out because I lose everything they give me.”

“They need to call our parents, or get hold of them by e-mail or something,” suggested another girl.

Students encouraged school leaders to stress novelty with events and to refine traditional school activities.

“Open House, Oh God, that’s really boring,” a girl said. “No one shows up. We don’t want to do nothing at Open House but explore the building.”

“If they don’t do nothing funner for Open House, then I don’t think we should have an Open House.”

“The Fall Festival is getting boring,” one boy said. “They need to add more games and stuff. And another thing. The basketball games. My Mama ain’t going to come to my basketball game in that gym. When we be having a home game, that gym be so little. We only got two sets of bleachers. And all the kids mostly be on the bleachers. So, they don’t have no room for the parents.”

“They need to add more exciting stuff for these people, our parents, to come,” one girl stated emphatically.

“My Mama be coming if there be some free food,” another girl chimed in.

“Some escargot or something,” one girl said, then added for those who might not know what it meant: “Snail.”

The conversation shifted to strategies Noe could use to improve the school’s “entertainment” value.

“We could have a parent party,” one girl suggested.

Let parents dress up in Halloween costumes, another student recommended.

Others students said the school should display more art and projects in which they’ve excelled by creating more bulletin boards and glass display cases. These efforts to demonstrate multiple forms of educational achievement would give their parents more visual cues about what they are learning in school.

As one girl said: “We never actually show off everything, you know?”

Research Question 8: *Mention anything else not already discussed.*

Given the chance to stress anything not already covered in the conversations, the students repeated their desire to have more sports and after-school activities that would provide additional ways for them and their parents to feel connected to Noe. They stressed the need for better facilities for spectator sports. And they said they wish their teachers communicated more regularly and positively with their parents.

Finally, in an extremely encouraging comment, one boy said about the focus group session, “This is the best hour I’ve ever spent in school.”

Final reflections

Clearly, middle school students are moving out of the stage when they automatically enjoy all forms of attention from their parents. They rebuff adults’ attempts to “fuss” over them indiscriminately. At the same time, they are hungry for positive attention from a distance. Having their parents in the audience when they excel at school activities is important to them, but they often prefer more private expressions of support for their achievements. School leaders can help parents understand the growing independence of their children and the helpful ways in which they can support their education.

Many students in the focus groups seem to believe that a parent in the school building can mean only one thing – trouble. It is disheartening, but perhaps not surprising, to discover that they do not view parent participation in a positive light. If school leaders want to use parent involvement to help boost the achievement of struggling students at Noe, they must give parents other ways to connect to the school than responding to their children’s low grades and bad conduct.

School leaders should consider planning events in which many students – not just a few -- have an opportunity to shine. The focus group responses indicate that students want and need more ways to be recognized at Noe. For students who are not strong academically, sports and other extracurricular activities can help them feel connected to the school and motivate them to do better in class. And, as they indicated, their parents would be more likely to come to school if they knew that their children would be performing.

When parents are not accustomed to coming to school, and when they are uncomfortable about doing so, they may need more creative outreach efforts from educators. Noe may have to invest significant energy – beyond just sending out invitations – to overcome the reluctance of some parents to show up for school events. Students in the focus group were explicit that their parents need to see something appealing or promising, on their own terms, to venture into the school building. Food, fun activities, and financial incentives were suggested ways to make uninvolved parents feel welcome at Noe. Although these initiatives may increase the staff’s work load initially, they could help reduce the faculty’s responsibilities over time. For, when parents and their children have regular opportunities to interact positively with educators, they will be more willing to work with them to solve academic problems.

The students' comments also reveal that adolescents are important conduits of information about school. They were very clear about what they want to share with their families, and if they only experience school in negative ways, they will communicate those same impressions to their parents. If school leaders want to engage the entire family, they must improve the flow of information in the educational triangle – school, child, and parent. Each of the players should have access to the same information and have faith in the school's policies and practices so they can work together, not against each other.

Finally, school leaders must be careful not to assume that uninvolved parents care less about their children's education than the parents of high achievers. The indifference or disinterest some parents express may stem from their own poor experiences with the schools of their youth. Struggling students often have parents who struggled themselves in school. They may not have learned how to interact well as children, much less as parents. Moreover, it is human nature to avoid conflicts. Parents who do not consider school a welcoming place where every child can succeed will not willingly participate in the life of the school – no matter how many cash prizes or escargot Noe offers as incentives.

Appendix N

Electronic copy of Westport report not available.