



# Promoting Student Voice through Student Focus Groups



## A FISHBOWL EXERCISE\*



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## **STUDENT “Fishbowl” FOCUS GROUPS**

The Student Fishbowl Focus Group is a highly adaptable process that uses basic dialogue concepts and a simple structure to encourage students to express their opinion, ideas and concerns about their classrooms and school. The reversal of formal roles, where students speak and adults listen, makes a strong impression on students and adults alike.

Students take the role very seriously and appreciate the opportunity to speak about what is important to them. They learn that students of different backgrounds have very similar perspectives on many important questions and they develop greater respect for both their similarities and their differences. The adults learn that the students understand a great deal about how their school operates and that students value the adults who genuinely want to help them. The students have realistic ideas about changes that can be made to make their school or class better and are willing to share responsibility for making changes happen.

The adults and students in partnership develop strategies for change that will make a clear difference and begin to strengthen teacher-school staff-student relations. The student fishbowl focus group process is being used successfully with all grade levels in elementary, middle and high schools to improve schools by learning what the students really think.

## GUIDELINES FOR THE “FISHBOWL” FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

### Purpose

- Provides opportunity for students to be involved in improving their schools.
- Gives richer meaning to Healthy Kid Survey (HKS) data.

### What It Is

A three-part focus group process that examines positive, resilience assets – **caring relationships, high expectations and meaningful participation** – in schools.

- **Part 1 - Orientation** (*45-60 minutes*): Students and adults prepare for this process in separate sessions and rooms.
- **Part 2 - Youth speak & adults listen** (*about 60 minutes*): a group of 8-10 youth (ideally, representative of school) respond to a set of 4 to 6 questions, with one youth at a time answering the same question, while adults listen.
- **Part 3 - Dialogue** (*about 30 minutes*): Youth and adults discuss themes, key points, concerns, recommendations and next steps.

### Why It Is Important (Potential Benefits)

The reversal of formal roles makes a strong impression on students and adults alike. Youth and adults learn what students really think and have impetus to work in partnership to develop strategies for change. Specifically, some benefits are:

#### Youth:

- Appreciate the opportunity to speak and practice speaking about what's important to them.
- Learn that students from different backgrounds have very similar perspectives on important questions.
- Develop greater respect for similarities and differences across student groups.

#### Adults:

- Learn students understand a great deal about how their school operates and that they value adults who genuinely want to help them.
- Develop common understanding of resilience and protective factors.
- Appreciate knowing the little things that make a difference to students.

#### School:

- Strengthen teacher-school staff-student relationships.
- Generate action plans and activities that youth feel make a difference.
- Increase protective factors and external assets that are positively associated with lower risk factors and improved student performance.

## **What It Requires of Teachers and Staff Who Participate**

- Adults who are willing to listen to, and support, students.
- About 2.5-3 hours of your time one afternoon after-school.

## **FOCUS GROUP ROLES**

### **Students**

- Should represent the school as a whole (all ethnic, racial, social and cultural groups, abilities, and levels of success).
- Serve as participant researchers.

### **Adult Observers**

- Watch, listen, and takes notes. Do not speak.
- There is no direct interaction between the students and the adult observers during the focus group.

## **AGREEMENTS**

### **Discuss and post these agreements.**

#### **Students agree to:**

- No names.
- No put-downs.
- Speak one at a time.
- Focus on what you do like-want-need.
- Confidentiality.
- Remember time limitations.
- Speak your truth!

#### **Adults agree to:**

- Turn off cell phones.
- Stay for the entire focus group.
- Be silent during focus group.
- Keep the comments offered by students confidential (except for mandatory reporting).
- Commit to a plan of action that reflects the student's perspectives.

## **BEFORE THE FOCUS GROUP SESSION**

### **Seating**

The students should be seated in a circle with the adults sitting around them in a larger circle, fishbowl style.

### **Introductions**

Before the focus group begins, the adult facilitator welcomes the students, introduces him/herself and asks the students to introduce themselves to each other and write their first names on their name badge. The adult facilitator then gives an overview of the focus group process, stresses how important their ideas are and reassures the students that their specific comments are to be kept confidential.

The facilitator presents the Student Agreements and asks for any others they need for this to be a safe and comfortable process. Four to six questions, printed on separate and differently colored cards, are distributed and explained to the students. Ample time is given so that they may write their responses to each question on the cards and ask for any clarification. Writing their responses help the students keep track of their thoughts while others are speaking during the focus group process. This preliminary process is best done away from the adult observers.

## **DURING THE FOCUS GROUP SESSION**

The facilitator welcomes the adults, explains the process, asks if they can agree to the Adult Agreements, and reminds them that their role is to listen to the students. No one should be let in or out of the room during the session and all cell phones and pagers should be turned off. The students then go around the circle, introduce themselves by first name only. If appropriate, grade level, school site, etc., may be added.

### **Asking Questions**

No more than six questions will be asked, one at a time, for the group to answer. As each question is asked, the facilitator calls on one student at a time, going around the circle in order. The process continues with one person at a time answering the same question.

After everyone has had an opportunity to offer their response, the facilitator asks participants if there are any additional ideas that have not been expressed. After all questions have been asked, if there is adequate time the facilitator may ask additional questions to clarify or obtain more detailed information.

### **Closure**

The facilitator thanks the students for their participation and contribution and invites them to be involved in any planning process that will result because of the focus group information. The students should then be asked to express their feelings on the experience of being formally listened to by the adults.

The adults should also be asked to express their feelings on the experience of listening. The adults may ask the students clarifying questions at this time.

### **Youth Development Planning: An Important Follow Up**

The planning session begins with a dialogue about the themes and key points made by the students. Once the concerns and recommendations of the students have been identified, the discussions should identify possible resolutions that reflect the students' responses. If students have been invited to participate in the planning they should be asked for clarification details and their recommendations for solutions.

Next steps should be identified and responsibilities assigned. **If students have NOT been invited to participate in this planning process, the recommended next steps should be presented to them for their feedback.** Creating a structure for ongoing student involvement in school climate improvement is also a task of this planning group.

### **Public Announcement**

Some form of public announcement should be made to confirm the changes that will be made as a result of the student focus group process.

### **Selecting a Facilitator**

It is suggested that the focus group facilitator come from outside the school to conduct the focus group. Students may feel more comfortable expressing their views about school issues and their relationships with the adults on campus with a "neutral" facilitator. This could be a principal from a neighboring school, or other trusted professional.