

Collecting Our Data

INFORMATION BRIEF: *Conducting focus groups*

Focus groups are group interviews or discussions ideally involving 8-12 people for a period of about an hour and a half to answer and discuss a set of questions focused on a common experience. Focus groups are useful for gathering information about perceptions, attitudes, and intended actions or application of learning and can be used to gather such data from any group of stakeholders, e.g., teachers, administrators, parents, or students. They are particularly effective in determining underlying issues and concerns that can later be addressed in broader data gathering efforts such as questionnaires. You may want to have a discussion with your evaluation team about the make-up of your focus groups. For instance, usually role-alike groups are most appropriate for data gathering, although, for some projects, it may be useful to work with mixed groups, especially for the purpose of participants hearing other points of view on the topic.

Facilitating focus groups involves a style that is different from typical meeting facilitation. You may want to consider the following pointers for facilitating focus groups:

- **A focus group facilitator is, above all, a listener.** Your job as a facilitator is to encourage open discussion among the participants. The facilitator does not express his or her opinion, but rather helps others to express their opinions and to listen to those of other participants. The facilitator also takes responsibility for keeping the discussion on topic.
- **It is highly recommended that a team of two people conduct the focus group,** playing separate but equally important roles. One should be the discussion facilitator, while the other concentrates on taking detailed notes of the discussion. As a complement to those notes, it is sometimes helpful to tape record the focus group discussion. However, you should never tape record unless you've asked the permission of the participants and informed them that the recording will only be used for evaluation purposes and will not be shared with others.
- **Plan for the session to last about 1 and _ hours** depending on the complexity of issues.
- **It is essential that the group participants feel comfortable talking in this setting.** One way of doing this is to begin by explaining the purpose of your research and how the findings will be used. Assure the participants that what they share in the group is confidential (that you will not reveal names of people involved in focus groups). Assure the participants that you are tape recording the session only as a means of making sure that you capture all the major points made. It's good to conduct the focus group in a comfortable, private room, away from

distractions. The room should fit the size of the group and allow people to sit in a circle around a table.

- **Assure participants that you want to hear all points of view (positive and negative) and many different experiences.** They should be especially encouraged to share experiences that are different from those already shared.
- **Ground rules are important to establish at the very beginning of the session.** Some examples are:
 - Let everyone have a chance to talk.
 - Avoid side conversations around the table.
 - Stay close to the topic at hand.
- **Focus group questioning can be highly structured or open-ended.** What works for many is a middle-ground approach in which you start with a general discussion for the first 30-40 minutes, and then gently insert any of your directed questions that have not already been addressed during the remainder of the session.

So, for example, at the beginning of the session, the facilitator presents one very general question or area to be discussed or a series of related questions and encourages the group to "carry the ball" and present their points of view, ideas, and concerns. An opening question might be: "Tell us about your experiences with professional development (positive and negative), approaches that you believe work well or don't work well, and ideas you have for effective professional development for teachers in your school."

Some examples of direct questions that you may want to insert if not addressed by the group early in the discussion are:

- "Describe the kinds of professional development opportunities that have been offered to you during your teaching career."
 - "Which of these opportunities did you find most helpful to you in improving your practice?"
- **When possible, leave an opening for participants to contact you later if there is additional information they would like to share.**