Tennessee TSC
Tiered Supports Center

Student Involvement Series: Focus Groups

What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a planned discussion to gain perspectives from a group on a defined topic within a supportive atmosphere.[1] Focus groups can be used in schools to explore students' perspectives on school-wide systems or initiatives. Relative to one-on-one interviews, small group discussions provide students opportunities to exchange ideas, elaborate on other students' responses, and identify areas of agreement and disagreement among group members.

Using focus group data is one way to incorporate student insights into the school-wide RTI[2]-B framework. Providing input empowers students and helps teams determine how to best support them. Engaging students early in the development of an RTI[2]-B framework will minimize the need for modifications later on. This is because student needs will already be reflected in the plan.[2] Conducting student focus groups is an inexpensive, flexible, data rich, and efficient means of collecting data for decision-making.[1]

Focus Group Participants and Roles

Student focus groups typically include six to ten students with one to two adults as facilitators. The facilitator's role is to ask questions, make sure students stay on topic, and manage time (e.g., ensure adequate time is devoted to each question; wrap up the discussion by the end of the scheduled meeting).

A second adult may also be present to take notes or assist with audio recording the discussion. With permission from participating students, school leadership teams may decide to audio record focus groups for later reflection and discussion.

Focus Group Roles	
Student	• Answers prepared questions • Shares opinions and reactions
Facilitator	• Asks prepared questions • Keeps students on topic • Conducts focus group in a timely manner
Additional Adult	• Takes notes • Audio records focus group

Recruiting Student Participants

When recruiting students to participate in a focus group, RTI teams should consider students who are involved in different aspects of school life.

For example, a school may choose students in different grades who represent diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, participate in a variety of different clubs or sports, and range in academic performance. The primary goal of an RTI[2]-B student focus group is to solicit as many reactions to and opinions of the RTI[2]-B framework as possible.

Thus, it can be beneficial to recruit students who are and are not responding well to the school-wide system. Recruiting around 8 participants per focus group is optimal to get a wide range of views but also hear from each group member.[1]

Once prospective students are identified, a school's RTI team can invite them to participate in an organized focus group meeting. Forced student participation is not ideal because this may lead to information that is not useful. Invited students should feel free to accept or decline the invitation at any time.

Additionally, they should be asked to sign a letter of understanding that outlines participation guidelines. The letter should confirm that students understand:

- their ideas are of value and will be considered in the design or adaptation of the school-wide program,

- not to share any parts of the focus group discussion outside the group,

- whether the conversation will be audio recorded,

- they have the option to opt out at any time, and

- their confidentiality will be protected.

Example Student Letter of Understanding

We invited you to participate in a school focus group. The goal of this focus group is to understand what the RTI team is doing well in your school and gather suggestions to improve the school-wide behavior plan.

During the focus group, you will be asked questions about the school-wide plan. There are no right or wrong answers. The RTI team is simply looking for ideas to make the plan more motivating for students. If you choose to participate, we will expect you to be honest with your answers, even if you don't agree with other people in the group. Only one person will be allowed to speak at a time. This will allow us to hear all ideas. We want to create a safe environment for open discussion so that each student feels comfortable sharing their opinions. To that end, we will expect that what is said in the group is not repeated outside of the group.

You can choose whether or not to participate in this focus group. If you choose to participate, the responses you share will be recorded, but your name will not be included in the meeting notes and it will be removed from audio recordings.

I understand the information above, and I agree to participate in this focus group and follow these guidelines.

Signature: _____ Date:_____

Designing Questions

To make the most of an RTI²-B focus group, questions should be prepared in advance. When preparing questions, school-wide data should be examined to identify challenges that might be better understood with student input. The questions need to be written in developmentally appropriate language so students can understand them and offer meaningful feedback.

Ideally, questions should be open-ended, and they should relate to the school's RTI²-B framework and how it can better meet student needs. Once questions are developed, the facilitator should review the questions before presenting them to the focus group. This will help the facilitator navigate discussions smoothly and effectively. It is not necessary, however, for students to receive the questions beforehand.

The following tables provide examples of student-friendly questions designed to examine students' perspectives on school-wide data findings and RTI²-B implementation.
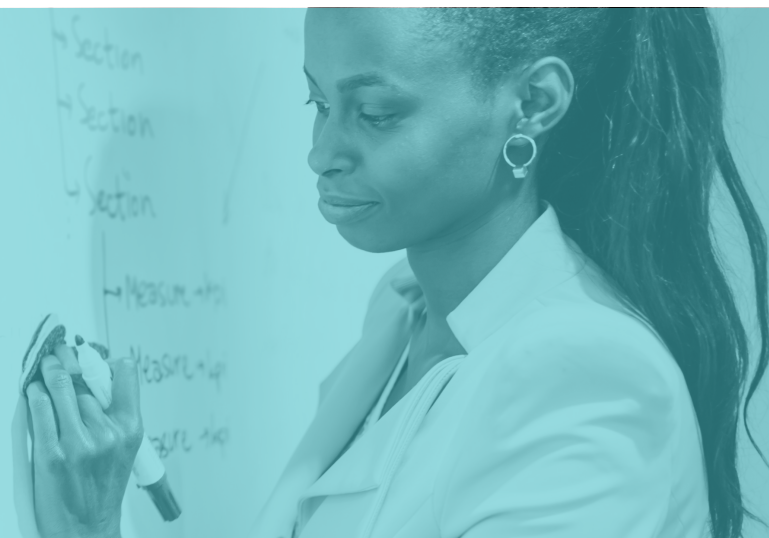
Questions Designed to Examine Student Perspectives on School-wide Data Findings	
School-wide Data Findings:	**Example Questions for Students:**
Since September, hallway office discipline referrals have increased by 20%.	More students have been getting in trouble in the hallways lately. Why do you think that is?
Only 1/3 of the school attended the most recent school-wide event.	Not a lot of people came to our last school celebration. Why do you think they didn't attend the celebration?
Sales from the school-wide store have decreased by 50%.	Students aren't buying a lot from the school store. What reward items should we add to the store? What would students like to buy?
Tardies have increased by 15% in the past month.	More students are showing up late for class/school. Why do you think that might be? What can we do to help students arrive on time?

Questions Designed to Examine Student Perspectives on RTI²-B Implementation
Why did our school adopt the RTI²-B framework?
What do you like most about our school? Least?
What types of rewards do you feel are needed at our school?
How can we better involve students in the school-wide system?
Do you feel safe at our school, and what contributes to that feeling?

Conducting a Focus Group

The facilitator should begin a focus group meeting by welcoming the participants and communicating the purpose of the meeting. From the start, students should feel their voices are important and that the RTI team is seeking information to improve the school-wide plan. After opening the meeting, the facilitator should proceed by asking participating students to respond to the RTI team's prepared questions.

As students respond, the facilitator should ask students to elaborate on ideas and keep the conversation flowing. After student responses are gathered for each question, the facilitator should end the meeting by thanking students for their participation, writing them a pass to go back to class, and dismissing them from the room. The duration of the focus group should match the developmental level of the students, with focus groups at the high school level lasting no more than 60-90 minutes to avoid potential fatigue and disinterest.[3]

The list below provides example prompts to extend student responses and focus group discussion.

Follow-Up Prompt Ideas

- How did that make your feel?
- Can you tell me more about that please?
- How do you think this can be improved?
- Why do you think that is?

Analyzing the Data

After a focus group, the facilitator should work with the RTI team to identify themes in students' responses to the focus group questions. Themes are reoccurring ideas that multiple students in the focus group shared or agreed with. To identify themes, the team will need to examine notes taken during the focus group and recordings of the meeting, if available.

Identifying response themes can help team members determine a starting point for making changes to the RTI²-B framework. As changes are made, the RTI team should communicate the changes to all students and highlight the value of student input in identifying the needed changes.

Summary

Focus groups are planned discussions that can be used to involve students in the development of an RTI^2-B plan. Information gathered during a focus group can be used by leadership teams to adjust the Tier I plan to better meet student needs. Focus group materials and formats should be tailored to accommodate the age of the student population.

For Further Reading

Tynan, A. C., & Drayton, J. L. (2007). Conducting focus groups: A guide for first-time users.

Endnotes

[1] Horowitz, J. A., Vessey, J. A., Carlson, K. L., Bradley, J. F., Montoya, C., & McCullough, B. (2003). Conducting school-based focus groups: Lessons learned from the CATS project. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, *5*(18), 321-331.

[2] Wyatt, T. H., Krauskopf, P.B., & Davidson, R. (2008). Using focus groups for program planning and evaluation. *The Journal of School Nursing*, *24*(2), 71-77.

[3] Packer-Muti. B. (2010). Conducting a focus group. The Qualitative Report, *15*(4), 1023-1026.