

# Listening to Students: Sample Focus Group and Survey Materials

## Overview

The *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts* supports a process to evaluate the assessments students currently take and then determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional and accountability purposes. The process should also lead to actions that ensure that every district-mandated assessment is of high quality, provides the information needed for specific school and district purposes, and is supported by structures and routines so that assessment results are actually used and action steps that will help students are taken. While the success of this process rests on several factors, one of the most critical is the extent to which district leaders intentionally incorporate the perspectives and experiences of students.

Students have unique perspectives through their direct experiences taking tests. Their perspectives are essential for “taking the temperature” on the assessment environment in the district and building a case for action. Clearly communicating to students (and by extension, their parents) the importance and urgency of this effort will help ensure momentum leading to action. Additionally, students’ experiences with assessments are foundational to understanding the assessments themselves, how the assessment results are being communicated and understood, and what can be done to make individual assessments and the district’s assessment program as a whole more effective and coherent.

This resource is designed to guide districts in the steps necessary to **design and use focus groups and surveys to incorporate student perspectives, experiences and expertise in the inventory process**. It includes two types of information.

- **Instructions.** Achieve recommends following a set of steps to design, build, use and analyze student surveys and focus groups to effectively incorporate this information in the inventory process and build toward actionable recommendations. **A set of guidance and resources** (beginning on page 2) addresses common questions about how and when to use student focus groups and surveys within the inventory process. It also includes design considerations district leaders should keep in mind as they develop these feedback instruments, use information gathered from students, and communicate findings to participants and stakeholders. Districts experienced in designing focus groups and surveys may feel comfortable skipping this section and move directly to the protocols, beginning on page 6.
- **Inventory Tools.** This resource provides student focus group and survey questions that district leaders can use or adapt as part of their local assessment inventory process. **Taking the Temperature on Assessments** (beginning on page 6) focuses on illuminating student perspectives on the district’s assessment program as a *whole* to build a greater understanding of the testing environment and



help build a case for action. Depending on district context, leadership teams may decide to use focus groups or surveys to illuminate student perspectives, experiences and expertise. As such, this guide includes questions appropriate for each of these formats.

## Instructions: Guidance and Resources

This guidance is intended to assist district leaders in developing a process for using student focus groups and/or surveys as part of the assessment inventory process.

### 1. DETERMINING DISTRICT NEEDS FOR STUDENT FEEDBACK BASED ON THE REFLECT AND PLAN QUESTIONS IN THE *STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS*

At the outset of the assessment inventory process, district leaders should address the Reflect and Plan questions on page 4 of the [Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts](#). These questions ask districts to think about the context, objectives and structure of the inventory process. District leaders are then encouraged to develop a strong understanding of student perceptions of testing through the **Taking the Temperature on Assessments** focus group and survey protocols beginning on page 6.

### 2. DECIDING WHETHER TO USE A FOCUS GROUP, SURVEY OR BOTH

Districts have multiple issues to consider when determining whether to use focus groups or surveys to gauge student perceptions. Focus groups allow for additional probing

and follow-up questions. On the other hand, focus groups are generally more costly than surveys to organize, staff and analyze, and they require access to skilled focus group moderators. Surveys allow districts to gather information from a large number of students in a relatively short period of time, and answers can be easily aggregated. Students may also feel more comfortable completing a survey than talking in a focus group. However, surveys do not allow for additional probing questions, and response rates may be low, especially if a survey takes too long to complete. Districts are encouraged to carefully weigh these issues in light of resource and timeline considerations, as well as local context and needs.

### 3. DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL FOCUS GROUP OR SURVEY PROCESS

There are multiple design considerations for focus groups and surveys. These considerations include focus group and survey administration, participation, setting and design. The focus group and survey protocols included in this resource are openly licensed, and districts are encouraged to add and/or adapt questions and protocols as needed based on local priorities and context. Below, focus group and survey design considerations are described separately.

#### Focus Group Design Considerations

*Who should administer a focus group?* District leaders can choose to administer their own focus groups or work with an outside organization with experience conducting focus groups. If district leaders decide to keep focus groups in house, it is important that focus group moderators are comfortable speaking with students, have a high level of rapport with participants, and are people with whom students are likely to feel they can be open and honest. If



district leaders have limited time or capacity for conducting focus groups, they can consider using the expertise of local institutes of higher education, community-based organizations focused on education and consultants with focus group expertise.

*Who should participate in a focus group?* District leaders should make every effort to recruit students with diverse perspectives and school experiences for focus groups. Districts should strive to select a representative sample of students across multiple criteria (e.g., grade level or span; school; or student subgroup, such as English language learner or special education). District leaders should also ensure that focus groups are demographically representative of the community, taking into consideration characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, etc. Districts should also consider how best to gather meaningful data from different age groups. Questions may need to be significantly different for high school, middle school and elementary school students.

Additionally, district leaders should carefully consider the number of focus groups that will be needed to get a detailed picture of a district's assessment landscape, as well as the number of participants that can be reasonably accommodated in any one focus group. To allow all participants multiple opportunities to contribute to the conversation, it is suggested that focus groups not exceed 10 individuals. It is also recommended that the focus group moderator be accompanied by a dedicated note-taker so that all responses can be recorded.

*What are the best opportunities to conduct a focus group?*

Districts or third-party organizations can use a range of formal and informal opportunities to gather feedback through focus groups. There may be already-scheduled events where large numbers of students will be present, such as back-to-school nights, which can be convenient and minimally disruptive for participants. Gathering informal feedback through small ad-hoc focus groups is another key opportunity, especially for districts with limited resources or shorter timelines for the inventory process.

*How can districts ensure that student focus groups are diverse and representative of the student population?*

Reaching a representative sample of students for focus groups presents unique challenges for districts. Districts can develop a set of strategies prior to engaging in focus groups. First, districts are encouraged to partner with community-based youth organizations to reach out to students from underrepresented groups. Second, when developing focus group participation lists, districts should compare the demographics of student participants to district enrollment information to ensure that a representative group of students has been reached when initial rounds of focus groups are completed. Districts should continue to monitor participant demographics throughout the process to strive for representativeness. Finally, districts should consider translating focus group protocols into additional languages spoken by students and having translators lead or assist with student focus groups where needed.

*What additional safeguards should be in place when gathering information from students?* Districts or external organizations should be aware of federal, state and district policies that protect students' right to privacy. Districts may want to consider guaranteeing anonymity to focus group and survey participants.



## Survey Design Considerations

*How should surveys be used to generate the most useful information?* District leaders should address several considerations as they design surveys as part of the inventory process.

- Choose only the questions that are most likely to generate the information needed.
- In prioritizing some questions over others, be sensitive to the time needed to complete the survey.
- Choose question types that best match needs and capacity to analyze data. A variety of question types are included in these sample surveys, all with different implications for data analysis. For instance, open-ended questions have the benefit of enabling respondents to provide their personal feedback, but they can be time consuming to analyze when looking at hundreds of responses. Conversely, multiple-choice responses are very easy to code for data analysis but do not typically give respondents an opportunity to provide in-depth feedback.
- After identifying the questions that would be most helpful, edit them as needed to ensure that they fit the local context and will resonate with respondents. Phrases in brackets within the template indicate places where the language needs to be customized or removed prior to being released publicly. These areas should be updated with the appropriate information.
- Decide whether to ask respondents to provide the name of their school or other identifying information as part of this survey. Districts and external organizations should follow federal, state and local laws safeguarding students' privacy.

- Prior to implementing the survey, try out the survey items on a small number of potential survey participants to get their feedback on the questions asked, clarity of questions and length of time the survey took.

*Who should administer a survey?* Surveys can be administered by a district or third-party organization. District leaders may want to administer their own surveys if they have prior experience developing and administering them, have had good response rates with previous surveys, and/or have sufficient capacity and expertise. District leaders may want to consider using an external, third-party organization to administer a survey if sufficient resources exist to hire an outside firm with expertise, the district has little experience designing and administering its own surveys, and/or privacy and anonymity of results are significant concerns.

*Who should participate in a survey?* Depending on district size, resources and capacity, district leaders can choose to either survey all students (census survey) or select a representative sample of students across multiple criteria (e.g., grade level or span; school; or student subgroup, such as English language learner or special education). Districts should also strive to collect surveys from a demographically representative sample of students, taking into consideration characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, etc. (see below). If initial survey results are not representative of the district's student demographics, districts should consider targeting additional individuals from underrepresented groups with follow-up survey requests.

*How can districts ensure that survey responses are from a diverse and representative sample of students?* Similar to focus groups, reaching a representative sample of students through a survey presents unique challenges for districts. First, districts should consider translating student surveys into additional languages spoken by students. Second, if the



survey is paper-based, districts can use a range of formal and informal opportunities to gather survey responses, in much the same way as focus groups described above. For example, homeroom/advisory classes are potential opportunities to have students complete surveys. For online surveys, districts should be aware that not all students have internet access and provide multiple opportunities — for example, at schools and libraries — for students to complete surveys. Third, districts may want to consider partnering with community-based youth organizations to reach out to students from underrepresented groups. Finally, when initial rounds of surveys are completed, districts should compare the demographics of student participants to overall student demographics to ensure that a representative group of students has been reached.

#### 4. NEXT STEPS: ANALYSIS, USE AND COMMUNICATION OF RESULTS

After districts have conducted all student focus groups and/or surveys, information gathered from these sources can be analyzed and incorporated into the Inventory Table (see pages 8 and 9 of the [Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts](#)). It is recommended that districts also communicate results of the focus groups and surveys to participants (and depending on timing and context, the public) to demonstrate that students' voices are being heard in the inventory process.

**Analyzing and using results.** Focus groups and surveys are part of the inventory process and will help inform the Inventory Table, overall analysis and recommendations. Please refer to pages 5–6 of the [Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts](#). Analyzing the responses may raise additional questions about student perceptions and experiences and the impact of assessments on students. For example, do particular assessments mentioned by students

fall within a specific grade level or grade band, or are these assessments taken by a specific subgroup of students? Are there concerns about the amount of testing in particular grades or subjects? This information from students may also help inform the district about communicating the results of particular tests to the broader community, as well as inform systemic needs around assessment and data literacy.

**Communicating the results to participants and the public.** It is important that district leaders communicate to focus group and survey participants that their responses and suggestions are being heard. Examples of communication to participants could include a letter to participants with a summary of what was learned through the sessions or survey, an invitation to a district or board meeting during which results will be discussed, and a timeline for moving from feedback to recommendations to action. District leaders may also want to consider releasing a summarized set of findings from the focus groups and surveys to the broader public as an interim step during the inventory process.

### Additional Resources

These additional resources may be helpful in designing and administering surveys and focus groups.

Achieve (2012). *Feedback Loops for Common Core Standards Implementation: Survey Tools for State Education Leaders*. [www.achieve.org/files/GuidanceforsurveysFINAL6-25-12-TOSHAREv2.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/GuidanceforsurveysFINAL6-25-12-TOSHAREv2.pdf)

Duke Initiative on Survey Methodology. <http://dism.ssri.duke.edu/resources.php>

Pew Research. *Questionnaire Design*. [www.people-press.org/methodology/questionnaire-design](http://www.people-press.org/methodology/questionnaire-design)



## Taking the Temperature on Assessments

This section, which includes sample focus group and survey questions, focuses on illuminating students' perspectives on the district's assessment program as a whole to build a greater understanding of the testing environment. It is recommended that these questions be asked of students toward the beginning of the process, prior to the Inventory Table being completed. Conducting focus groups or administering surveys early in the process helps make the case for why an inventory process is needed and will lead to concrete action to ensure that every assessment being used is useful and of high quality.

The protocols and questions listed below are openly licensed, and districts are encouraged to add and/or adapt questions and protocols as needed based on local priorities and context.

### TAKING THE TEMPERATURE ON ASSESSMENTS: SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

#### INTRODUCTION AND WARM-UP

A warm-up period for focus groups is important to help participants understand the goals for the session, create a common understanding around how participants and the moderator will interact, and build comfort among participants and with the moderator. Below are a suggested set of "ground rules" and an introductory exercise, followed by sample focus group questions.

*Note to moderator: Prior to conducting this focus group, it is important to be clear with participants about the types of assessments for which the district would like feedback. Will there be discussion only of assessments that are given across multiple classrooms or schools as part of a district/school assessment program, or is the district also interested*

*in teacher-developed classroom assessments? This should be discussed as part of the introduction and warm-up. Add and/or adapt questions to best meet your local needs and context.*

- **Introduction of moderator and focus group guidelines:**

- > We're going to be talking about testing in your school. This will help the district better understand the volume, quality and use of tests given in the district.
- > The district will look at all of its testing through the perspective of students. It is important to understand how different kinds of students experience testing. That is why we have invited you to participate in these focus groups.



- > This focus group is part of a larger process to examine many kinds of tests given to students. Through this process, the district will make decisions about which tests are high quality and necessary for students to take and which tests can be modified or eliminated.
- > One person should speak at a time.
- > There are no “wrong” answers to any of these questions. We are interested in hearing your perspectives as students.
- > We value confidentiality. We will not associate any feedback that comes out of this focus group with a particular individual.
- > Everyone will have a chance to speak. If you have not had an opportunity to provide your perspective, I may call on you.
- > Please turn off or silence your cell phones.
- > Are there additional guidelines the group would like to add?
- **Disclosure of note-taking:**
  - > A note-taker is present to make sure that we get all of your feedback. The note-taker will not associate comments with names.
- **Parking lot:**
  - > There is a “parking lot” chart/board/area where we can put ideas or thoughts that come up in our discussion that are important but may not be related to the purpose of this group. We want to capture those important thoughts, but we also want to keep focused on the purpose of our meeting. These ideas or thoughts will be shared with appropriate individuals following the meeting.
- **Communicating results of focus groups:**
  - > The results of the focus groups will be summarized, and you will receive a summary by {date}. If we missed any key points you raised during this conversation, please let us know.
- **Introductory exercise (possible options):**
  - > Types of tests given to students
  - > Examples of tests given in the district
  - > What questions do you have about testing before we begin?
- **Introductory exercise (possible options):**
  - > How long have you lived in this community?
  - > What kinds of activities are you involved in outside of school?
  - > What do you like to do for fun?



## FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

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1. What grade are you in? Which school do you attend?
2. What kinds of tests have you taken in the last year?  
*(Moderator prompt: tests designed by your teacher for just your class [e.g., chapter tests, mid-terms, finals], tests all students in your school take [e.g., schoolwide writing prompts, district benchmark tests, statewide tests {e.g., PARCC, Smarter Balanced}}, tests you take for college entrance or honors [e.g., AP, IB, ACT, SAT])*
3. Do you think students in this district are given too many tests, not enough tests or about the right number of tests throughout the school year? Why do you say that?
4. What are some examples of tests that you have found useful in understanding what you've learned and need to do next? What has made them useful?  
*(Moderator prompt: you get the results quickly and they are clear, test measures important material covered in class, test helps measure readiness for college or career)*
5. What are some examples of tests that you have not found useful in understanding what you've learned and what you need to do next? Why have they not been useful?  
*(Moderator prompt: you don't get the results for a long time or at all, test measures material not covered in your class, is not helpful in measuring readiness for college or career)*
6. How do you think your teachers use the results from the tests you take? How do they talk to you about test results? How do you talk about them with your parents/family?
7. What tests, if any, do you think you should keep taking? Why do you say that?
8. What tests, if any, do you think you should not keep taking or should be changed? Why do you say that?  
*(Moderator prompt: you do not have enough time to take the test, too much time is spent taking the test, tests should include different kinds of questions)*
9. Do you have any other suggestions on how to improve the tests you take?





## TAKING THE TEMPERATURE ON ASSESSMENTS: SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

*Sample language to introduce the survey:* This survey asks questions about tests that you take. This survey will help your school and your district make good decisions about testing. Your responses to this survey are confidential — we do not ask for your name and will not ask for any personal information. If you have questions about this survey, please contact{\_\_\_\_\_}.

*Note to survey designer:* Prior to administering this survey, it is important to be clear with respondents about the types of assessments for which the district would like feedback. Is the primary focus on assessments given across multiple classrooms or schools as part of a district/school assessment program, or is the district also interested in teacher-developed classroom assessments? The district should also explain how results of the survey will be used, whether district stakeholders will be presented with a summary of findings and how these findings will be used to inform action.

- 1. What grade are you in?**  
{district should prepopulate with grades}
- 2. Do you think students in your school are given too many tests, not enough tests or about the right number of tests throughout the school year?**
  - Not enough tests
  - About the right number of tests
  - Too many tests
- 3. What concerns or worries do you have about the tests you take?** {open-ended item}
- 4. What are some examples of tests that you have found helpful in understanding what you're learning and what you need to do next?** {the district can prepopulate this item with a list of assessments given in the district if known}
- 5. In general, what about these tests make them helpful?**
  - Connected to what I am learning in the classroom
  - Results are available soon after taking the test
  - Scores and information provided to me are easy to understand
  - Provides ideas on how to help me improve in my classes
  - Results show me how my scores compare to the scores of other students in my school, district and/or state
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_



- 6. What are some examples of tests that you have not found helpful in understanding what you're learning and what you need to do next?** {the district can prepopulate this item with a list of assessments given in the district if known}
- 7. In general, what about these tests makes them not helpful?**
- I do not understand the connection to material I am learning in class
  - I do not receive results quickly
  - Scores and information provided to me are difficult to understand
  - Does not give me ideas on how to help me improve in my classes
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. How do you think your teachers use the results from the tests you take? How do they communicate with you about test results?** {open-ended item}
- 9. How do you talk with your parents/family about test results?** {open-ended item}
- 10. What tests, if any, do you think you should keep taking?** {open-ended item OR district can list specific assessments}
- 11. What tests, if any, do you think you should not keep taking?** {open-ended item OR district can list specific assessments}
- 12. Are there any other suggestions you want to make about tests that you take?** {open-ended item}