Listening to Parents: Sample Focus Group and Survey Materials

Overview

The *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts* supports using a student-centered 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.

Parents are justifiably concerned about the amount of testing their children experience in public schools. Furthermore, the layers of state, local and classroom testing do not always add up to a cohesive whole that informs parents about their child's progress. Understanding how parents perceive, understand and use assessments is essential to the inventory process and building the case for action. Reaching out to parents to understand their perceptions around assessments sends a clear signal that the district takes their concerns about testing seriously and will help build momentum leading to action that will ultimately benefit students.

This resource is designed to guide districts in the steps necessary to **design and use focus groups and surveys to incorporate parent 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 parent 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 parent 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 parents, 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 7.

- **Inventory Tools.** This resource provides parent 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 7) focuses on illuminating parent 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 parent 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 parent focus groups and/or surveys as part of the assessment inventory process.

1. DETERMINING DISTRICT NEEDS FOR PARENT 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 may want to refer to 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 parent perceptions of testing through the **Taking the Temperature on Assessments** focus group and survey protocols beginning on page 7.

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 parent 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 parents in a relatively short period of time, and answers can be easily aggregated. Parents

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 parents, have a high level of rapport with participants, and are people with whom parents 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? We encourage district leaders to make every effort to recruit parents with diverse perspectives for focus groups. Districts should strive to select a representative sample of parents 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 make efforts to ensure that focus groups are demographically representative of the community, taking into consideration characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, etc.

Additionally, district leaders will want to 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 community 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 parents 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 parent focus groups are diverse and representative of the student population? Reaching a representative sample of parents 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 organizations to reach out to parents from underrepresented groups. Second, when developing focus group participation lists, districts should compare the demographics of parent participants to student demographics to ensure that a representative group of parents 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 groups protocols into additional languages spoken by parents and students and having translators lead or assist with parent focus groups where needed.

How should districts prepare parents in focus groups to talk about testing? Parents have a wide range of experiences with and knowledge of testing, and it is important for focus group participants to have a common understanding of assessments before beginning the conversation. Some parents may have little knowledge of the assessments students are taking, and the focus group is an opportunity to build their awareness and understanding. Districts can use a variety of strategies to build this knowledge of testing. Districts might consider sharing a short definition of testing (including different kinds of tests) with parents prior to the focus group conversation, as well as samples of the different kinds of summative, interim and formative assessments that their children take. The inset on page 4 includes a sample description of those three common types of assessment.

Distinguishing Among Assessment Types—Summative, Interim and Formative[1]

Broadly speaking, there are three assessment types—summative, formative and interim. Each type of assessment has its own purposes and ways the information will be used.

A summative assessment is generally given at the end of some unit of instruction, such as a unit of study, course or grade, to evaluate students' performance against a set of standards. These tests often have important uses such as for accountability and public reporting at the school and district levels, and in some states, for student-level stakes such as promotion and graduation, or for educator evaluation systems. Summative assessments are also often used to better understand student growth over time, to ensure quality, consistency and alignment of instruction, or to provide information to evaluate larger-scale educational programs.

Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement. Thus, it is administered by the teacher in the classroom for the purpose of diagnosing where students are in their learning, where gaps in knowledge and understanding exist, and how to help improve student learning. The assessment is part of a classroom learning activity and linked directly to the teacher's instruction. The assessments are small scale, taking only a few seconds or a few minutes. Furthermore, the tasks presented may vary from one student to another depending on the teacher's judgment about the need for specific information about a student at a given point in time. Providing helpful feedback, modifying instruction to improve the student's understanding or indicating areas for further instruction are essential aspects of a classroom formative assessment. Examples of formative assessments include teachers asking students to explain the methods they used to solve a problem or administering a short quiz.

An interim assessment is the term for the assessments that fall between formative and summative assessment. Interim assessments (1) evaluate students' knowledge and skills relative to a specific set of standards, typically within a limited time frame, and (2) are designed to inform decisions at the classroom level and school or district level. Consequently, while interim assessments may be given at the classroom level to provide information to the teacher, the results can be reported at a broader level than those of formative assessments. These assessments may serve a variety of purposes, including predicting a student's likelihood of achieving a certain score on a statewide summative assessment, evaluating a local assessment program, or identifying gaps in a student's learning. Many of the assessments currently in use that are labeled "benchmark" or "predictive" fall within this definition of interim assessments.

[1] This description is adapted from *The Role of Interim Assessments in a Comprehensive Assessment System* (Achieve, 2008). www.achieve.org/files/TheRoleofInterimAssessments.pdf

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 below 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 child's school or other identifying information as part of this survey. If these types of questions are included, it is highly recommended that they be clearly listed as optional and be placed at the end of the survey so individuals are fully aware of what will be shared prior to providing their information.

- 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 parents (census survey) or select a representative sample of parents 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 parents, 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 parents? Similar to focus groups, reaching a representative sample of parents through a survey presents unique challenges for districts. First, districts should consider translating parent surveys into additional languages spoken by parents and 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, back-to-school nights and other scheduled events where large numbers of parents will be present are natural opportunities to have parents complete surveys. For online surveys, districts should be aware that not all parents have internet access and provide multiple opportunities—for example, at schools and libraries—for parents to complete surveys. Third, districts may want to consider partnering with community-based organizations to reach out to parents from underrepresented groups. Finally, when initial rounds of surveys are completed, districts should compare the demographics of parent participants to student demographics to ensure that a representative group of parents has been reached.

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

After districts have conducted all parent 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 parents' 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 parent perceptions and experiences and impact on students. For example, do particular assessments mentioned by parents 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 parents may also help inform the district about communicating the results of particular tests to parents, as well as inform systemic community 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

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

Pew Research. *Questionnaire Design.* 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 public schools. 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 parents of students from different grades, schools and backgrounds 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 parents.

> 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.

- **Introduction to testing (see page 4 for more information):**

  > 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 your kids involved in?

  > What do you like to do for fun?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What grade(s) are your child(ren) in? Which school(s) do they attend?

2. What kinds of tests does your child take? *(Moderator can use specific test names or prompt: classroom tests designed by teachers such as quizzes, chapter tests or finals; tests given to all students in a school or district; state-mandated tests)*

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?

4. From whom do you receive information about testing? *(Moderator prompt: school principal, teachers, district staff, other parents, students, the media)*

5. What are you hearing about testing from other parents? What are you hearing from your children?

6. What are some examples of tests that you have found useful in monitoring your child's progress in school? Why have they been useful? *(Moderator prompt: results are timely and clear; test measures important concepts, predicts later performance or readiness for college and careers)*

7. What are some examples of tests that you have not found useful in monitoring your child's progress in school? Why have they not been useful? *(Moderator prompt: results are not timely or clear; test doesn't measure important concepts, is not helpful in predicting later performance or readiness for college and careers)*

8. What tests, if any, would you suggest the district continue to administer? Why?

9. What tests, if any, would you suggest the district consider eliminating or changing significantly? Why? *(Moderator prompt: performance based assessments, more diverse item types, more or less time spent on tests)*

10. Are there any other suggestions you want to make to the district as it reviews its testing program?

TAKING THE TEMPERATURE ON ASSESSMENTS:
SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Sample language to introduce the survey: This survey asks questions about testing given in this district. It is part of a larger process to examine all administered tests in the district and make decisions about which tests are high quality and necessary for students to take and which tests can be modified or eliminated. Your responses to this survey are very important and will help shape recommendations for the future of the district's testing program. Finally, your responses to this survey are confidential—we do not ask for any personally identifying 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? It may be helpful to provide a description of different types of assessments (see page 4 for some sample language).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(s) are your child(ren) in?**
   {district should prepopulate with grades}

2. **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?**
   - ❏ Not enough tests
   - ❏ About the right number of tests
   - ❏ Too many tests

3. **Do you think the time spent on testing in this district is too much, too little or about right?**
   - ❏ Too little
   - ❏ About right
   - ❏ Too much

4. **What level of concern have you heard about the time spent on testing from *other parents*?**
   - ❏ No concern
   - ❏ Some concern
   - ❏ A lot of concern

5. **What concerns about testing in the district, if any, do you have?** {open-ended item}

6. **From whom do you receive information about testing?**
   - ❏ School principal
   - ❏ Teachers
   - ❏ District staff
   - ❏ Other parents
   - ❏ Students
   - ❏ Media (television, radio, internet)
   - ❏ Other (please describe):

7. **What are some examples of tests that you have found helpful in understanding your child's progress?** {the district can prepopulate this item with a list of assessments given in the district if known}

8. **In general, what aspects of these tests make them helpful?**
    - ❏ Connected to what my child is 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 my child
    - ❏ Results show me how my child's scores compare to the scores of other students in his or her school, district and/or state
    - ❏ Other _____

9. **What are some examples of tests that you have not found helpful for understanding your child's progress?** {the district can prepopulate this item with a list of assessments given in the district if known}

10. **In general, what aspects of these tests make them not helpful?**
    - ❏ Do not understand connection to what my child is 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 my child
- ❏ Other _____

11. **What tests, if any, would you suggest the district continue to use as it does today?** {open-ended item OR district can list specific assessments}

12. **What tests, if any, would you suggest the district think about eliminating?** {open-ended item OR district can list specific assessments}

13. **Are there subjects or areas you think the district should be testing where it is currently not doing so?** {open-ended item}

14. **Are there any other suggestions you want to make to the district as it reviews its testing program?** {open-ended item}