Partnerships for Literacy

Focused Discussions with Families

(Draft 6.6.18)

# **Purpose**

Focused discussions with family members are an effective tool for schools for gathering feedback and input into school decisions and planning. Schools can use focused discussions to gather information (qualitative data) to more fully understand parent and caregiver perspectives. Focused discussions are helpful for explaining and expanding the results of surveys. They are also inexpensive and quickly implemented. The focused discussion guidelines presented in this document are less formal than some focus group protocols that are strictly implemented and contribute to research. These focused discussion guidelines should be considered guidance for hosting focused discussions with adult family members or caregivers about home-school partnerships that support early literacy.

# **Selecting a Facilitator & Participants**

Participants should represent the families served by the school. Consider including grandparents who are raising children, fathers, foster families, families of children receiving Special Education services, and families with a range of incomes. When a deeper understanding of one subgroup is desired, such as families of exceptional students, a focused discussion of members from that group should be convened. Before the event, determine if any participants will need an interpreter or documents translated. Each focused discussion should have about 6-12 parents or caregivers.

During the discussions, parents and caregivers can build on and reflect on each other’s responses. No one participant should dominate the discussion. The facilitator’s role is to guide the discussion back to the topic gently, reminding participants of the purpose of the discussion. Facilitators are neutral and should not share their own opinions. Facilitators can use reflection to clarify what they hear, but should refrain from speaking too much.

# **Preparing Family Participants**

1. **Arrange the family participants in a circle** of chairs, with or without a table.
2. **Provide nametags** and begin with introductions.
3. **Welcome all** of the participants to the discussion and let them know that the ideas and opinions they share will help the district or school do a better job serving their students. Let the parents and caregivers know that you would like them to share their ideas, personal experiences with the school, as well as their child’s experiences in school.
4. **Explain the process:** that you would like to learn about a certain topic today, and that you will be asking questions and keeping the discussion on track. If parents or caregivers have other topics they would like to discuss, set up a time to talk with them once the discussion is over or at a later time. While this type of discussion group does not provide confidentiality, the facilitator can suggest that the group treat each other’s comments with respect, valuing differences of opinion.



# **Recording Family Participant Responses**

Recording participants’ responses is important. Have a note-taker who is not involved in facilitating.

In addition, recording responses on a flip chart can help focus the discussion and give the facilitator a way to make sure he or she has understood the participants correctly.

# **Questions for Families about Early Literacy**

Facilitators can choose from the following questions from 3 main content areas: Communication, Learning at home, and Community Partnerships. Facilitators can also design their own set of questions around a different topic the school needs to know more about. In a one-hour meeting, plan to cover 3-5 main questions.

**Communication**

 1)

How would you describe the **communication** between school staff and you about your child’s reading and writing?

Select a Few Follow-up Questions to Deepen the Discussion and Attend to Sub-groups:

* How well does our school keep you up to date on your child’s progress in reading and writing?
* Do you get the information early enough to help prevent problems for your child?
* Is the information you get from your child’s teacher understandable and easy to access?
* Is information interpreted or translated for families who are still learning English?
* How do school staff members listen to you?
* Do you feel comfortable raising concerns or sharing your own insights?
* What are some examples of the expectations for your child that you have heard expressed by the school?
* When a child needs additional supports for reading skill development (Tier II or III), are families provided with school-based intervention plans for their child and receive more frequent communication (bi-weekly, monthly, etc.) about the child’s progress? And do families have the opportunity to share feedback with the school and make decisions about their child’s plan?

**Learning at Home**

 2)

How well does the school support you in providing **literacy supports at home**, like access to books tailored to your child’s interests and abilities, things to talk about with your child in relation to what they are doing in school, and incorporating new letters/words into your daily routine?

Select a Few Follow-up Questions to Deepen the Discussion and Attend to Sub-groups:

* Are activities sent home enjoyable for families to do together, brief, an extension of content already learned in the classroom, and able to fit into daily life?
* Does the school ensure that each child has access to books, writing supplies, and other resources at home to support the child’s practice and to encourage routine literacy-building activities in everyday life?
* When a child is identified for literacy-related supplemental or intensive instructional supports (Tier II or III), are families are provided with ideas for how to support literacy at home in conjunction with the school’s plan for the child?
* Are families learning English are encouraged to read and create a literacy rich environment at home? They are encouraged to speak/read in their home language.



3)

**Strategic Community Partnerships**

Does the school have **partnerships with other schools, community agencies, and family members** to promote shared reading and early language and literacy at home?

Select a Few Follow-up Questions to Deepen the Discussion and Attend to Sub-groups:

* Does the school work with local preschools, childcare, or home visiting programs. public, non-public, and Head Start early childhood education programs to seamlessly prepare and transition the children from one building to another, supporting their continued literacy development over time?
* Is the school a hub for literacy development, bringing in partnerships with community resources that support shared reading and language and literacy activities at home (e.g., afterschool programs, mentoring programs, ESL classes for families, summer programs, library, YMCA, churches, etc.)?
* How do community partners currently build awareness and support for literacy in the community (e.g., literacy picnics, library events, guest-readers, etc.)? What more could they do?
* Does the school invite families to partner with them within the walls of the school to support early literacy and language development?

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