



## ***Student Focus Group Facilitation Tips for the Coordinated School Health Demonstration Project Learning Partner Schools***

### **What is a focus group?**

Focus groups are interviews of small groups of seven to ten people/youth who represent a target audience. Focus groups are structured information-gathering strategies. Before convening a focus group, it is helpful to determine what information is needed, why it is needed and why a focus group is the best strategy for getting the information.

Focus groups are helpful in generating ideas about how to overcome resistance to change, identifying the best way to introduce a new program, or clarifying ways to communicate information about a program or test messages. Once you begin implementing the changes, focus groups can also help to identify weaknesses in the implementation plan or problem areas that need adjustments. Finally, focus groups can help you to evaluate the success of your efforts.

How a focus group is conducted is as important as the questions. Therefore, the person selected to ask questions and facilitate discussion in the focus group should be a good listener who is perceived as a neutral party on the issue discussed. Because all information generated in a focus group should be recorded, focus groups require both a recorder and facilitator. Recorders should have experience taking notes. It is also helpful to have a tape recorder available.

To effectively and efficiently gather information, careful planning of questions is critical to success. Focus group questions generally follow the sequence listed below:

- Opening questions help participants get acquainted and comfortable.
- Introductory questions identify the topic of interest.
- Transition questions enable you to move smoothly into your main area of concern.
- Key questions obtain the information central to the project.
- Ending questions restate the objective and bring closure.

(Strategies for Change: A Field Guide to Social Marketing for School Health Professionals, American School Health Association, 2004)

### **What is the purpose of running a student focus group for the NJ Coordinated School Health Demonstration Project?**

The purpose of this focus group is to gain insight into student knowledge and views on healthy lifestyles; primarily related to nutrition and physical activity.

## **Facilitators: Two co-facilitators are needed**

The Co-Facilitators have two primary roles:

- **Facilitator:** Engage students and guide them to reflect, share and possibly gain new understanding of the topic. Use a flip chart. It is helpful to pre-write questions.
  1. When using the flip chart, write very short phrases (4-6 words) or single words to capture comments. Participants like to see their statements in writing.
  2. It is okay if someone corrects what you have written.
  3. If possible, fit all responses to one question on one sheet. It helps discussion to see all comments on one page.
- **Recorder:** Document the ideas, suggestions and verbatim comments on the *Student Focus Group Recording Document*. This form follows the question format. CSH, LPS Team Leaders are requested to share focus group responses with their wellness teams and submit the results as outlined in the Student Focus Group Guidance. Immediately following the focus group, the recorder and facilitator should review and correlate student responses.

## **Materials /Logistics:**

- Utilize easel & flip chart for important points.
- Obtain markers.
- Distribute name tags (blank) for students – this will help to engage students. Instruct students to write their first name only.
- Provide water or healthy refreshments (optional).
- Utilize *Student Focus Group Recording Document* (recorder).
- Select a quiet meeting room.
- Secure parental consent for each student participating in the focus group.
- Provide folders with resources for nutrition and physical activity to be distributed at the end of the focus group session (optional).

## **Incentives: (Optional)**

- Offer extra credit for participating in the focus group.
- Certificate of participation.
- Pass for study hall.
- Free lunch.
- Other.

## Participants:

- 7<sup>th</sup> grade students (boys and girls) middle school.
- 10<sup>th</sup> grade students (boys and girls) high school.

## Ground Rules:( for example)

- The group discussion will begin and end on time.
- Students will sit in a circle with the co-facilitators when possible.
- Following introductions, all students will be asked to respond to the first question.
- Students will raise their hands to request to speak and will talk one at a time.
- Students will respect one another and share verbal space with the group.
- Students speak candidly and openly about their feelings and experiences with an emphasis on making constructive comments.
- Students will be informed that all individual responses will be confidential but group response will be shared with the wellness team and coordinated school health project staff.

## 9 Suggestions for Leading a Focus Group Discussion:

- **Reduce Tension:** As soon as everyone is assembled, go over the purpose of ground rules of a focus group so that everyone knows what to expect. Be informal and reassuring. Create a climate of **trust**. The atmosphere is important because when people feel comfortable they will be willing to share.
- **Encourage Discussion:** Address the group rather than individuals; in other words, avoid singling anyone out. Give everyone a chance to speak. Speak of “us” and “we” rather than “you” and “I.” Watch out for hidden agendas, yours or others. Control dominating speakers. Avoid criticizing anyone’s remarks.
- **Listen Carefully:** Concentrate on what the person is saying while he/she is speaking. Don’t get emotionally involved. Ask follow-up questions to gain more understanding or demonstrate active listening by clarifying, paraphrasing, or summarizing a comment
- **Ask Open-ended Questions:** It is not important whether you agree or disagree with student participants’ views. In response to a member’s comment or question, ask others to share how their views are similar / different. A good way to keep the discussion moving is to ask “what if” questions. Encourage alternative or diverse ideas.

- **Explore Alternatives:** One of the principals in a focus group is the way it can open people up to new ideas. Don't dismiss anything. If the group gets focused on a single issue or theme, encourage an exploration of other ideas, suggestions, and insights.
- **Manage the Silence Gap:** Be comfortable with silence, and pause appropriately to allow participants time to consider each question. Only after sufficient time has passed, offer an example to get feedback started.
- **Be enthusiastic and Involved:** Explore your own feelings about leading a focus group. Make sure that you don't have your own agenda or have introduced a hidden agenda. Stay focused and be supportive of your colleagues.
- **Be Flexible:** If a good discussion gets going, you might choose not to hurry the group on to the next discussion question. On the other hand, try to keep the pace moving so that you can discuss as many of the focus group questions as possible.
- **Be Organized:** Make sure that your meeting space is comfortable, well ventilated and that chairs are in a circle (if possible). Co-facilitators sit across from each other in the circle. Hand out focus group's ground rules (in writing) or place on flip chart.

(Focus Group Toolkit, Princeton Center for Leadership Training, 2001)

### **Active Listening Guidelines**

- A Put yourself "in the shoes of the other person" and pay attention to his/her concern. Practice the following active listening interventions:

#### ***Examples***

**1. Paraphrase:**

*This is what I hear you saying . . . is that right?*

**2. Ask for Elaboration:**

*Could you say some more about that?*

**3. Make Supportive Comments:**

*You seem to be very frustrated: or I can see how difficult this is for you.*

**4. Give Nonverbal Support:**

*Good eye contact. Nodding in understanding*

**5. Ask Probing Questions:**

*What do you mean by that?*

**6. Summarize:**

*I hear you saying several things: first \_\_\_\_\_, second \_\_\_\_\_, and finally \_\_\_\_\_.*

**B. Avoid the following traps:**

1. Giving your own opinions
2. Making generalizations
3. Interjecting your own story
4. Agreeing or disagreeing with what the speaker is saying
5. Giving advice



## FOCUS GROUP QUESTION AND FORMAT NEW JERSERY COORDINATED SCHOOL HEALTH DEMONSTRATION PROJECT 2010

### Introduction

- I. Let me introduce myself
- II. Briefly mention the New Jersey Coordinated School Health Project “Healthy Schools Grow Healthy Kids”
- III. “Explain the purpose of the focus group: – We wanted to get the scoop directly from you-hear what you think about being healthy and what you do to stay healthy. While we will be writing down what you say, we will not write down who said it, so you should feel free to say what you think-all your comments today will be anonymous. However, we hope that your comments will help your school to become a healthier place for all students.
  1. (Warm up) what is your name. (First name)
  2. What is one kind of physical activity you enjoy after schools hours? For example, do you skateboard, ride a bike, play on a sports team? (each student quickly states – This is a warm up also)
  3. Where have you have learned about healthy eating or nutrition? **What is healthy eating?** What foods/beverages do you eat just about every day that you think are healthy? What foods/beverages do you eat that are probably not so healthy? (**preference**) (List on large poster paper.)
  4. What are the benefits of healthy eating? (Discussion and list on poster paper)
  5. What do you think are the consequences of unhealthy eating? (Discussion and list on poster paper)
  6. Sometimes it is hard to eat healthy foods even if you really want to. What prevents you from eating healthy foods at school? After school?
  7. Some of you may have a hard time eating breakfast in the morning. Some of you may not eat breakfast at all. **Raise your hand if you don't eat breakfast?** (Write count on poster) Why is it so hard to eat breakfast? What are some possible solutions to those obstacles? (Examples: getting up 10 minutes earlier, eat something you can eat at the bus stop, make breakfast the night before, buy breakfast at school)
  8. What do you eat for breakfast (Students will write response on a posted note and place it on a large poster paper)

9. How about lunch? Who usually buys and who usually brings lunch? (Write count on poster paper) What foods/beverages do you eat/drink for lunch? (Students will write response on a posted note and place it on a large poster paper)
10. (Discussion) What is good about school lunch? If so, what and why is it good?
11. What suggestions would you make to your school to promote healthy eating? How can you get involved?

### **Now let's talk about physical activity:**

1. What does it mean to be physically fit? How do teenagers get physically fit and how do they stay physically fit? What are the benefits ?
2. New Jersey requires all students to take physical education classes every year. Do you get enough exercise in your physical education classes? Why or why not? What is your favorite part of PE? Your least favorite part of PE?
3. How many of you play a sport at school? (raise hand-get #) Town sport/recreation? (add # of raised hands to poster paper).
4. What prevents you from being physically active in your community?
5. What other forms of physical activity do you like to do after school or weekends? (post note).
6. We have been talking about nutrition and physical activity and how it can impact your health. Since you all participate in health classes, what other aspects of health are important? Are they addressed in your school?
7. If you could make one suggestion to improve the health of students in your school, what would it be?



## New Jersey Coordinated School Health

### "Healthy Schools Grow Healthy Kids" Demonstration Project

Dear Parent:

In 2009 our school was invited to participate in the "Healthy Schools Grow Healthy Kids", Coordinated School Health Demonstration Project.

This Healthy Schools Grow Healthy Kids Project is the result of a cooperative agreement between the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) in partnership with New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Division of Adolescent School Health. The CDC awarded funds to NJDOE to improve the health and educational outcome of young people. The mission is to prepare youth to be healthy adults. (See attachment)

Our school was invited based on a history of health-focused programs that were taking place at the school in recent years. The funding for this project enables our school to develop an action plan that will strengthen or improve school health policies and programs to promote health of staff and students.

One of the project requirements is to engage a small group of students in a focus group. We want to hear students' views on physical activity and their food choices. Their ideas will be used to help make healthy changes at the school to improve school food choices and opportunities for physical activity.

Please sign the attached permission form for \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in a focus group conducted by the DOE and the DHSS. Your child's name will remain anonymous.

The focus group will take place on \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_,  
in classroom #\_\_\_\_\_.

Please sign the enclosed Permission slip and email \_\_\_\_\_, or  
fax: \_\_\_\_\_ to me by \_\_\_\_\_ 2011.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,





# STUDENT FOCUS GROUP RECORDING DOCUMENT

## NEW JERSEY COORDINATED SCHOOL HEALTH DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

SCHOOL \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE TAKER \_\_\_\_\_

PRESENTER \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your name? List first name only or initial for first name.

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2. What kind of physical activity do you enjoy after school hours? (i.e. – skateboarding)

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3. Where have you learned about healthy eating or nutrition? (i.e.,parent)

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