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Using Focus Groups in Schools

Chapter at a Glance

- What is a focus group?
- What questions and decisions can focus groups address?
- What will schools gain by using focus groups?
- When should focus groups not be used?
- How can the focus group findings be used?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups?

By all accounts, there has been a dramatic increase in the last decade in the number of schools using focus groups. A look at the popular media for the 1980s shows that there were virtually no reports of schools across the United States using focus groups for decision making. In the early 1990s, such reports began to appear and had quadrupled in number by the end of the decade (Nelson & Coe, 2000). This trend supports our strong belief that focus groups have an important role in schools.

But what is the role of focus groups in school decisions? We begin to answer that question in this chapter and continue to provide answers throughout the book. More specifically, the purpose of this first chapter is to define the term *focus group,* to discuss, in general, the ways schools can use them, and to provide some specific examples of their use by schools. We then make a case for using focus groups in schools and also explain when they should not be used. Finally, we explain how focus group findings can be used, as well as their advantages and disadvantages as information-gathering tools.

What Is a Focus Group?

If you have not used focus groups before, the term *focus group* may bring marketing or political campaigns to mind. You may be mentally picturing a group of ordinary citizens gathered together to express their opinions and perceptions about a product or a campaign issue. Based on this input, strategies for "selling" an idea or product will be developed. If you have this perception, you have some of the basics right. Typically, a focus group includes the following traits:

- Consists of 6 to 10 participants
- Is led by a trained moderator
- Has the purpose of discussing one topic or issue in depth

The term focus group refers to the role of the group members who are *focused* on a particular discussion topic. Certainly, such groups can provide you with information about people's opinions and feelings concerning the topic. But the real strength of focus groups is that you will also gain insight into their reasons for those opinions. In other words, you will understand the "Why?" behind their responses. Three aspects of focus groups help accomplish this. One, the open-ended questioning format of a focus group helps explore participants' comments. Two, there is an underlying assumption that participants are usually more willing to express their opinions amidst the security of other people who share some of their concerns and interests. And three, the atmosphere in focus groups is one of sharing and discussing rather than just interviewing, because moderators encourage participants to interact directly with each other. Thus the format of the group is conducive to gathering information not just about how people feel but also about why they feel that way. This is the essence of a focus group.

What Questions and Decisions
Can Focus Groups Address?

As we discussed in the previous section, you can use focus groups to gather information about people's opinions, feelings, and perceptions. For example, you might want to know what they need, what they like and dislike, whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied, or what they believe are good solutions to a problem. In the first column of Table 1.1, we show some general categories of focus group use by schools. In the second column, for each

Table 1.1   Uses of Focus Groups by Schools

How Can Focus Groups Be Used?	Examples of Possible Uses	Examples of Actual Uses Reported in Media
To conduct needs assessment	To determine what technology training teachers believe is most important to address during inservice offerings	To determine what staff, faculty, higher education officials, parents, and students think high school graduates would need to succeed after graduation (Gerry, 2000)
Evaluation of overall institutional effectiveness	To determine perceived strengths, weaknesses, and/or overall effectiveness of school or district	To help assess the community's attitude toward the district in the face of funding concerns (Gaynair, 1995; Scruggs, 1994)
Evaluation of program/policy effectiveness	To determine consumer satisfaction (families, teachers, students) of the inclusion program and which aspects they regard as strong and weak	
To generate ideas	To generate ideas for developing public information campaign for an upcoming referendum (e.g., timing, media usage, etc.)	To find ways the school district can save money, improve management, and increase efficiency (Guerard, 2000)
Problem finding/definition	To determine whether there are problems in the transition from middle to high school and to determine the nature of any problems	To assess race relations in district high schools (Washington, 1994); to determine concerns regarding increasing enrollment and whether to seek another building referendum (Waller, 1995)
To generate solutions	To generate solutions for resolving communication problems that exist between home and school	
To change an existing program	To determine how to increase the number of people accessing the school Web site designed to provide information to students, parents, and the community	To restructure gifted programs and to find alternative funding ("Parents Look," 1993)
Budgeting decisions	To get feedback from the community regarding proposed budget priorities	To determine what the community wants from school and how much they will pay for it ("Focus Groups Planned," 1993)
Hiring decisions	To gather information about the skills that would be required to fill critical administrative positions	To get ideas on criteria for hiring a new superintendent (Chalifoux, 1997; "Post Falls Seeks Input," 2000)
Design/site new buildings	To generate ideas for the form and function of the "school building of the future"; to get feedback from the community regarding location and interior/exterior	To generate ideas for a new middle school (Campbell, 1992); to get community feedback on a facilities expansion plan (Bolton, 2000)
To test proposed plan or materials to learn about possible acceptance or rejection	To obtain community reaction toward a plan designed to enlist community support for a tax referendum; to test parent reaction to a new grade report form	To get public reaction to three different plans for reorganizing school boundaries (Russell, 1995); to determine whether or not to pursue a bond package plan (Berard, 1998)
Evaluation of training programs/materials	To determine whether teachers believe the inservice program is effective; to determine what new teachers think of the district's orientation and mentorship programs; to determine teacher opinions of the training materials for the newly adopted reading program	

(continued)

Table 1.1   Continued

How Can Focus Groups Be Used?	*Examples of Possible Uses*	*Examples of Actual Uses Reported in Media*
Evaluation of assessment methods	To determine whether the survey used to assess parent satisfaction asked all the important questions and whether the format was clear and convenient; to determine whether the district's minimum competency test for seniors achieves its purpose	
"Post mortems" of failed decisions	To determine people's reasons for voting against the referendum; to determine potential supporters' reasons for failing to vote	To understand why people opposed the referendum (Johnson, 1995)
Demonstration of accountability	To provide evidence to funding agencies that input was obtained from consumers (e.g., students, parents)	

of those general categories, we provide some examples of more specific possible uses. In the third column, we list some examples of reports in the media of schools actually using focus groups. A note about Table 1.1: We do not mean to imply that either the general categories of use or the possible and actual uses constitute exhaustive lists. In fact, we encourage you to consider the information we provide in Table 1.1—and in the examples we provide throughout the text—as a starting point for considering a whole range of other possible uses in your particular situation.

What Will Schools Gain by Using Focus Groups?

Given the examples of uses in this chapter as well as other possible uses you might consider, it is an understatement to say that focus groups can be used in many ways. For some of these uses—feedback on an inservice session, for example—focus group projects could be planned and conducted with little effort. However, in other cases—such as determining why district residents voted down a tax referendum—conducting focus groups would require a significant investment of resources. Why then should you invest the time and effort to learn about and conduct focus groups in schools? What

will you gain? Here is our answer to these questions: to make consumer-supported decisions. As a school leader, you are probably all too aware that lack of support—for example, from teachers, parents, students, or the community—can turn a potentially successful decision into a failure. On the other hand, you also know that when you thoroughly understand relevant issues from the viewpoint of people directly affected by a decision, you are more likely to gain support and thereby ensure a successful outcome.

The importance of consumer support becomes critical when information is being gathered for *high-stakes* decisions. High-stakes decisions are those that affect many people or lead to changes requiring enormous amounts of time, effort, and resources. Examples of high-stakes decisions include deciding whether a school should be closed due to low enrollment, selecting a plan for changing school boundaries, determining whether a bond issue should be placed on the referendum, and selecting new curricula. In these cases, you would be wise to use focus groups to gather information from everyone who would be affected.

In addition to determining consumer support, another reason for conducting focus groups is to continually improve the effectiveness of school policies, programs, and products. For instance, you can use focus groups to get answers to questions such as "How can parent-teacher meetings better meet the needs of both parents and teachers?" "Are we making the best use of our time in our teacher meetings?" and "How can we improve the assignment book?" Another goal that is closely related to increasing effectiveness is increasing consumer use of such programs and products. Even if a program or product is inherently effective, successful implementation depends a great deal on whether consumers perceive it as both beneficial and feasible. Suppose, for example, that the assignment book mentioned above has been implemented schoolwide. Obviously, success depends on whether teachers and students actually use it. And in turn, use depends on whether they believe the assignment book will actually make a difference and whether it will be worth the trouble. Focus groups could give you an understanding of those teacher and student beliefs, which you could then use to improve the assignment book and to find ways to promote its use.

A final reason for using focus groups in schools is to enable school leaders to stay "in touch" with all those concerned (for example, teachers, parents, and students) on a routine basis. For instance, focus groups could be used to listen and attend to their needs, problems and concerns, likes and dislikes, and feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This information, although it may not be directly related to any particular decision currently being considered, can serve as important background information when particular decisions are on the table. Listening to consumer perceptions on a continuing basis has another powerful benefit: boosting morale. For example, we will never forget the comment of one parent as she left a focus group session we had conducted. As we profusely thanked the participants for their time, this parent said, with tears in her eyes, "Thank *you!* I'm just so glad to know that other parents are in the same boat, and that someone really listened to me tonight."

When Should Focus Groups Not Be Used?

Although there are several benefits in using focus groups across a broad range of applications, there are some instances in which focus groups should definitely not be used, and we discuss four of them here. Do *not* use focus groups in the following instances:

- You want information on a sensitive or intimate topic.
- You need information you can summarize numerically and use to make predictions about the opinions of others.
- Your purpose is for the group to resolve issues or solve problems.
- Your purpose is for the group to make a decision for you.

In the first instance, in which the topic is of a sensitive nature, it stands to reason that people would not be as inclined to be candid in a group as they might be in a one-on-one conversation. In the second instance, summarizing focus group information in a numerical form and making predictions on the basis of those numerical summaries is not appropriate. Focus group information can help you identify a range of opinions on a topic as well as understand reasons for those opinions. But the actual number of people in a focus group who express a particular view is not useful information because it is not an accurate indication of the proportion of people in the population who hold a similar view. For example, if every teacher in a focus group says the new reading program is a vast improvement over the previous program, you have no good reason to believe that 100% of the teachers in the district hold the same view. If you need numerical summaries, you will need to use another information-gathering tool, such as a survey.

The third instance in which focus groups should not be used is when the participants in a group are expected to resolve issues or solve problems by reaching a compromise or a consensus. Attaining a compromise or consensus is not feasible within the format and structure of a focus group. For example, focus group discussions are always conducted within a finite, predetermined amount of time. In other words, the focus group participants stop their discussions and go their own ways when the allotted time is over. On the other hand, if the goal is consensus or compromise, the participants in a group must have unlimited time and must be able to meet as many times as necessary to accomplish that goal. Therefore focus groups cannot be used for resolving issues or for solving problems. However, focus groups can be used to gather information that can be used toward resolving issues or, more specifically, to gather solutions to address the problems.

Finally, the fourth instance in which a focus group is not applicable is when you expect the participants in the group to have a decision ready for you. Remember, focus group participants cannot make decisions for you; they can only voice their feelings and opinions. The responsibility of making a decision ultimately rests on you.

How Can the Focus Group Findings Be Used?

To understand how focus groups findings can really be used in schools, it is first essential to address two questions. One, are focus group findings believable? In other words, are they valid? Two, can you make decisions on the basis of focus group findings alone? The answer to the first question is yes, focus group findings are believable and valid under three conditions: (a) when used appropriately and not misused, (b) when conducted properly, and (c) when interpreted correctly.

Before we answer the second question—can decisions be made on the basis of focus group findings alone?—consider the following example. If 18 out of 24 focus group participants (e.g., parents) indicate that an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) form is difficult to read, one cannot assume that 75% of the parents in a school would also find the form difficult. However, if a series of three focus groups reveal several problematic areas in the IEP forms, then it is possible to assume that these responses are also part of the perceptions of the target population. Thus although it is inappropriate to make a numerical projection from the findings, it is appropriate to assume that some of the information gathered will be manifested in the larger population.

Now, to come back to our question—can decisions be made on the basis of focus group findings alone? The answer is yes, they can, if the type of information obtained from a focus group is sufficient. On the other hand, you should not depend on such findings alone if you need numerical projections in addition to the information obtained from a focus group. In addition to the type of information desired, you should also consider the type of decision you are preparing to make. If you are planning on making some high-stakes decisions, you would be wise to base your decision on information from more than one source: Focus group information could provide important information but should be corroborated with information from other sources.

What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups?

Like any information-gathering tool, focus groups have some advantages and disadvantages. In Table 1.2, we list nine issues that should be taken into account as well as advantages and disadvantages for each of those issues. In this section, we discuss two of those issues: the type of information gathered and flexibility.

Table 1.2   Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

	Advantages	*Disadvantages*
Flexibility	Focus groups are very flexible; there is no one correct way to use or implement them.	Flexibility may be interpreted as the freedom to plan, design, and conduct focus groups in a haphazard manner.
Face validity	Focus group findings have tremendous face validity—that is, what you see and hear is what you get. The information gathered from a focus group is therefore not difficult to understand.	
Cost	Costs can be contained if internal resources ("in-house moderators," free-of-cost meeting rooms) are used.	Focus groups can be expensive if external resources (moderators, meeting locations) must be used. However, the costs of large-scale survey projects are equally expensive.
Planning and preparation		Planning and preparing for a large focus group project takes time and effort; however, this time will be less than the time needed to interview all the focus group participants individually. Also, this time may be comparable to the time taken to construct a good-quality survey instrument.
Type of information gathered	Focus groups have an advantage over surveys and brainstorming groups because only in a focus group is it possible to understand the "Why?" behind the participants' comments.	Unlike a survey, it is not possible to collect numerical information from a focus group.
Moderator reliance		The success of a focus group depends heavily on the skills of the moderator. If the moderator influences the discussion in any manner or form, the findings will be compromised.
Influence of the group processes	Focus groups provide a sense of anonymity and security for the participants, helping to facilitate candor in participants' comments. Focus groups stimulate the participants so that one person's comment triggers additional spontaneous comments from others.	Participants may sometimes not voice their real opinions and "go along" with what another participant said. However, what a moderator says and does during the focus group can diminish this possibility.
Direct contact with participants	Focus groups facilitate direct contact with the participants and help others to vicariously experience what the participants have experienced. Additional insights can also be obtained during a focus group by observing the participants' nonverbal behavior (e.g., expression of anger, the way participants handle a product being evaluated).	
Analyzing the findings	Information obtained from focus groups doesn't have to be subjected to sophisticated analysis methods like that from a survey.	Analyzing the information gathered from the focus group can be time-consuming and effort intensive depending on the method of analysis chosen.

With respect to the type of information that can be collected, focus groups have an advantage over surveys and brainstorming groups: Only in a focus group is it possible to understand the "Why?" behind participant comments. For instance, a survey response can be summarized as, "I like the curriculum a lot," whereas a focus group response can be summarized

as, "I like the curriculum a lot because ____." Similarly, a comment from a brainstorming group could be summarized as, "We need more phones to solve this communication problem," but a focus group response could be summarized as, "We need more phones to solve this communication problem because ____. I believe that this will help because ____." These additional insights make the focus group a valuable tool.

The other issue, flexibility, holds both the promise of a major advantage and the danger of a common pitfall. Because there is no one correct way to implement focus groups, they are very flexible and have a wide range of uses. However, this very advantage will be a weakness if flexibility is interpreted as having the freedom to plan, design, and conduct focus groups in a haphazard manner. Doing so would surely weaken the results by compromising the quality, soundness, and trustworthiness of any information you obtain from the focus groups.

Although there are no hard-and-fast rules on how to conduct focus groups, some definite guidelines form a frame of reference and provide direction. In this book, we enumerate these guidelines, which are based on an extensive review of literature as well as our practical experience. You will then be able to make informed decisions and choices while planning, designing, and conducting focus groups. The goal of this book is not just to inform and educate you, but to guide you as you plan, design, and conduct focus groups.