



# Putting Kids on the Pathway to College

## Focus Group Protocol for Students

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How well is your high school preparing students, especially low-income students, to graduate on time ready for college-level work and with a college or technical school acceptance letter in hand? This tool is designed to help you find out what students think of your school's efforts and what they believe might facilitate their timely graduation and postsecondary study.

The tools in this series are intended to be used together in order to involve the full school community – educators, families, students, and community members – in assessing your school's efforts and finding ways to strengthen them. The tools are: a framework and rubric to help assess how well your school's practices align with practices in high-performing high schools; a survey to gather data on students' perspectives; and focus group protocols for students and families to deepen understanding and help people learn from each other. All the tools have been field tested.

### About the Student Focus Group Protocol

A focus group discussion is a good way to find out what students really think about a topic. A small group of six to ten students at similar levels of schooling talking together can deepen understanding, develop ideas, and help people learn from each other. We recommend holding several of these discussions, with different groups of students.

A focus group is a “moderated conversation” of one-to-two hours about a specific topic – in this case, how well students think their school is preparing them to graduate and go to college. A

moderator asks a series of related, open-ended questions and keeps a record of the responses.

### How the College Pathways Series Was Developed

The College Pathways series grew out of the findings in *Beating the Odds*, a study of thirteen high-performing New York City high schools by Carol Ascher and Cindy Maguire for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Each of the schools admitted ninth-graders with high poverty rates and far-below-average reading and math scores but produced four-year graduation rates and college acceptance above the district average, and well above other high schools serving similar students.

The study identified four “key components” common to these “beat the odds” schools:

- Academic rigor
- A network of timely supports
- A culture of college access
- Effective use of data

To help other schools benefit from what these schools have learned, the Annenberg Institute has developed a set of tools that schools can use to assess their status in the key component areas and to strengthen their practices to put all their students on a path-way to college.

The *Beating the Odds* study and the full set of tools (Rubric, Student Survey and Focus Group Protocol, and Parent Focus Group Protocol) are available at: [www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/BTO.php](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/BTO.php)

## Conducting the Focus Groups

To understand how different students feel about what is offered at your school, you should hold a series of focus groups, each directed at students at similar points in their schooling.

On the following pages you'll find a protocol with a script for the focus group discussion. Start with the general questions, one at a time; use prompts (a few are suggested for each question) if the discussion lags or students get off track.

### Tips on Moderating the Discussion

1. Be clear that the purpose of the focus group is to stimulate a discussion about
  - a. how students are experiencing the academic aspects of high school; and
  - b. how the school could do a better job of preparing them for timely graduation and for college or other postsecondary study.
2. Be sure to explain at the beginning of the meeting that confidentiality is important. Let the students know that no ideas will be attributed to specific students. Also, ask students to agree not to gossip later about what is said in the room.
3. To draw out the full range of opinions, or to see if an opinion is shared by others, you may need to stop the conversation and ask: "This person made this comment, what do other students think? Does anyone have a different take on this issue?" If someone has been quiet, ask if he or she would like to comment.
4. As the moderator, it's essential that you be neutral and that you make it safe for opinions to be expressed freely. Keep your own comments to a minimum. If there's a period of silence, keep quiet to allow others to think. Doing so can create space for more quiet people to respond.
5. Ask one question at a time. Make it clear that all opinions are welcome and will be respected. Give people at least 15 seconds to respond before using a prompt.

6. Start with the general questions and use the prompts to be more specific. To stimulate discussion, you can offer opposing positions on an issue that comes up. For example, you could say: "Some students think that algebra at this school is just for the smart kids, but others think all kids can do it. What do you think?"

### Tips on the Process

1. It is useful to put up a sheet of chart paper for each question and ask a student to be the note-taker to record comments. This will enable students to see and reflect on what they have said.
2. If you are planning to audio-record the conversation, make sure you have enough microphones so that every speaker can be heard clearly.
3. Because you will be conducting several focus groups and will want to compare the results, make sure that the same questions are asked to each group.
4. If a teacher or counselor is part of the focus group, that person should be advised in advance not to correct what students say about the school, even if they may be wrong.
5. Student participants will want to know the results after all the groups are held. This would be an excellent topic for an article in the school newsletter or other reports and news bulletins.

# Student Focus Group Protocol and Script

## Welcome Participants and Introduce Yourself

Begin the session by welcoming everyone and introducing yourself and your co-facilitator/note-taker. Explain your role in the school community.

## Explain the Purpose of the Discussion

SAY: “\_\_\_\_\_ School wants to improve the way it helps students graduate on time, ready for college or more education. The purpose of this discussion is to learn how you think the school is doing, in an atmosphere of safety and confidentiality, with no negative consequences to you or your school.”

## Explain What You’re Going to Do and Ask Permission to Record

SAY: “We’re [or I’m] going to ask you a few questions about how the school has worked with you to support your success. We/I also want to hear your ideas about how the school could do a better job. This should take about one class period, or about an hour.

“We want to be sure that everyone feels free to speak his or her mind. Please listen to the ideas of others with an open mind and respect their privacy. What we say in this room should stay in this room – will you agree to do that?”

“With your permission, we’d like to tape our conversation and write down your thoughts and ideas on chart paper. Everything you say will be treated confidentially; no specific opinions will be attributed to any particular student. Is that OK?”

“Any questions before we get started?”

## Ask Participants to Introduce Themselves

SAY: “Now, let’s go around the table [room/circle] and introduce ourselves – what is your first name, how long have you been in this school, and what are your plans after graduation?”

## Begin the Discussion

*Important:* Wait at least 15 seconds after asking a question to give students time to respond. Use the prompts only if no one speaks up or to get the discussion back on track.

1. What things about your program at \_\_\_\_\_ School make you confident about graduating on time?

### *Prompts (use as needed)*

Are your courses tough enough to prep you for college work?

Do your teachers expect enough of you?

Do they believe in you, and expect you to graduate?

Do you get the help you need when you need it?

Do you know how well you’re doing in your classes, and exactly what you still need to graduate?

2. What things about your program at \_\_\_\_\_ School make you worried about graduating on time?

*Prompts*

Are your courses tough enough to prep you for college work?

Do your teachers expect enough of you?

Do they believe in you, and expect you to graduate?

Do you get the help you need when you need it?

Do you know how well you're doing in your classes, and exactly what you still need to graduate?

3. What things about your program at \_\_\_\_\_ School make you confident about going on to college or a technical school?

*Prompts*

Do you feel your courses are preparing you for college level or other post-secondary work?

Do you know what will be expected of you when you get to college?

Have you been told about the academic help you can get once you're in college?

Do you know the courses you need to get into the college program that interests you?

4. What things about your program at \_\_\_\_\_ School make you worried about going on to college or a technical school?

*Prompts*

Do you feel your courses are preparing you for college level or other post-secondary work?

Do you know what will be expected of you when you get to college?

Have you been told about the academic help you can get once you're in college?

Do you know the courses you need to get into the college program that interests you?

5. How could \_\_\_\_\_ School make it easier for you to graduate and feel prepared for college or technical school?

*Prompts*

Understanding what it's really like at college or at a technical school?

Thinking about where to apply?

Understanding the programs that are available and what would work for you?

Helping to find the money you need?

Helping with your applications?

6. What do your parents know about what you need to graduate and be prepared for college?

*Prompts*

Knowing about coursework or credits you need?

Understanding how much it will cost to go to college?

Familiar with the education needed to go on to your chosen career?

## Close the Discussion

Assure students that their ideas will be useful. For example, they might be reported to the school improvement team, the student organization, and the parent organization, and a short report might be posted on the school Web site.

Remind students that no one's ideas will be identified by name.

Thank them for participating.