



## INTERPRETING DATA AND EXPLORING IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT WITH STUDENTS

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Schools often invite students to share their experiences and ideas, but how often do they invite them to become an integral part school and classroom change? Effective learning environments see students as a diverse community of learners who are both willing to and highly capable of shaping decisions about their learning and school improvement.

CEA recently held focus groups with students at schools participating in ***What did you do in school today?*** Many students told us that they complete the survey each year, but do not see the results. When we asked if they would be interested in seeing them they responded with an enthusiastic, “yes!”

A core idea of ***What did you do in school today? (WDYDIST)*** is that students’ educational experience is changed when staff and students actively collaborate in the process of improvement. Students want to know that their voices are making a difference, but there are also many ways that student voice can become an inspiration for meaningful student involvement in school planning and decision-making.

Below, we have drawn together some examples from schools participating in ***WDYDIST*** to illustrate the many different ways that schools can involve students by sharing survey results, collaborating in their interpretation, and inviting students to take an active role as co-designers of school change.

- 1. PRESENT A SUMMARY OF SCHOOL RESULTS TO STUDENTS AT AN ASSEMBLY.** If students have been involved in discussing the data (see ideas below), those individuals could play a leading role at the assembly.
- 2. SELECT A FEW KEY RESULTS AND PRESENT THEM IN HOMEROOMS, ELECTRONIC ANNOUNCEMENT SYSTEMS, WEBSITES, OR BULLETIN BOARDS.**

### 3. COMMUNICATE HOW STAFF ARE USING RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY.

For example, “**You Said, We did**” - at one school, staff used the school’s television announcement system to highlight different results from the open-ended questions and how the school had responded (e.g. *On the **WDYDIST** Survey You Said you Wanted More Intramurals and Clubs at Lunch and We Created a Student-Staff Committee to See What Activities Students are Most Interested in*).

### 4. CLASS DISCUSSIONS:

- a. After reviewing **WDYDIST** results at a staff meeting all staff were asked to take a few of the results that interested them most to their classes for discussion. At the next staff meeting everyone reported back on what they had learned from students through these discussions and this feedback was incorporated into the staff’s planning in response to the results.
- b. Data from **WDYDIST** would also be an interesting source of content for class discussions, projects, or inquiries in different curriculum areas (e.g. exploring the topics of student voice, democracy, or student engagement in civics, social studies, drama or Language Arts classes).

5. **STUDENT INTERVIEWS:** In their second year of collecting survey data, the **WDYDIST** team at one school wanted to bring a deeper sense of students’ experiences to a PD day designed to help teachers reflect on connections between the data and classroom practice. A few students joined the beginning of the day in person to speak with staff directly and the **WDYDIST** team shared videos of interviews they had conducted with a number of students to capture their input on changes in classrooms that would help them to feel more engaged in school and their learning. In this example, staff took the lead for interviewing students. You could also consider allowing students to take the lead in designing, conducting and creating a video or written record of interviews (also see student led research at #8).



**6. FOCUS GROUPS:** This approach creates opportunities for staff to ask students specific or general questions about their experiences of school and learning: staff learn from students, and students often learn a lot from other. If you are interested in holding a focus group with students the following set of questions, answers, and examples provide a guide for planning and facilitating the discussion.

**a. Who will participate?**

Groups can be diverse or homogenous depending on the nature of the questions you want to explore.

*For example ...* If you want to know why Grade 9 males at your school are experiencing low levels of intellectual engagement, for example, you might want to speak with Grade 9 male students, but holding a second focus group with Grade 9 female students or male students from other grades might also bring new insights because they create points for comparison.

**b. What do we want to talk about?**

To design a focus group the first step is identifying the questions, issues, or topics you want to discuss with students. In thinking about the flow of questions, remember to start with a question that students attending the focus group are familiar with and may have strong feelings about. Also make sure to phrase your questions or issue in terms that students are familiar with.

*For example ...* If you want to learn more about student engagement you might ask students to think of their favorite class and then ask them to describe what it is about that subject that interests them the most. If you want to learn more about a specific set of data you might also consider presenting a summary of the data as an introduction to what you are hoping to learn through the focus group.

## SOME GUIDELINES FOR DESIGNING FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- a. Begin with a clear sense of what you hope to learn from the focus group – do you have a specific question or will the focus group contribute to a larger inquiry (e.g. Why are Grade 8 students experiencing lower levels of intellectual engagement compared to students in other grades? What do students mean when they tell us that they are feeling bored or anxious in Language Arts? How can we involve students more actively in school and classroom planning processes?)
- b. Step back from your objectives for the focus group and consider where students might be at in thinking about the topic. If you want to know more about students' experiences of learning, for example, you might focus on questions that tap into what they feel is or isn't working in their classes, ask them to describe what was happening when they felt they really learned something or when they were so interested in their schoolwork that they didn't notice the time going by, etc. The following set of question provide sample

questions for exploring new ways of thinking about student leadership through a focus group:

- *Why did you join the student leadership team?<sup>1</sup> Does the team work in the way you thought it would work? Can you think of things that would make it work even better?*
- *Do you think students have ideas about what they want to achieve through their classes? How can students tell their teachers about their learning goals?*
- *The student leadership team has really influenced school activities, for example, changing how we do assemblies. Do you think students should also influence their experience in classrooms? Can you think of examples when students have had an impact on their classroom work?*
- *Would you like to see more students or even all students taking responsibility for creating a school that everyone wants to come to everyday? How could we make that happen?*

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document we use the term Student Leadership Team to help distinguish it from Student Councils. Although not the case in all schools, the work of Student Councils has traditionally focussed on leadership for school spirit, fund raising, and extra-curricular activities. Across Canada a focus on student voice and involvement has led to new leadership opportunities for students to form teams or committees and to work with teachers and administrators, providing input on changes in student learning, student engagement and other school wide change initiatives. We call these groups Student Leadership Teams.



### c. How will we get the discussion started?

1. Begin the discussion by setting the context for why you wanted to speak with the group.
2. Let participants know how you are using their input and express appreciation for the time they are giving to the process.
3. In group contexts it is important to give participants some time to think about their ideas or answers.

**For example ...** ask students to take a few minutes to think about an experience at school, how they would solve a problem or respond to an issue or to jot down a few of their thoughts on an idea or proposal that staff have designed in response to feedback from students. You can then open up discussion to the whole group, ask students to share their ideas in small groups and then report back to the whole group, or invite each student to share one idea that the next person can add to. If differences of opinion emerge, use these as topics for further discussion.

### d. How will we keep an accurate record of the discussion?

To keep a detailed record of the focus group it is best to have one person facilitating the discussion and a second person taking notes. Asking students to write their ideas on chart paper or a white board part way through a focus group can also give participants a chance to get up and move around.

### e. How do we end the focus group on a positive note?

Toward the end of the focus group leave some time for students to ask any questions or ask if they have anything to add that they feel is important, but you didn't ask about during the focus group.

- 7. WORKSHOPS:** At a school with a large student leadership team (35 students) the principal and a small group of teachers presented quantitative results to students. Following a brief discussion of these results, students broke up into smaller teams and read student responses to the open ended questions (all names and other identifying information had been removed beforehand). As students read they took notes on issues that came up frequently in the data and decided as a team on the top three for further discussion. At a second workshop the teams regrouped to offer ideas for responding to the issues. For each issue, they responded to two questions: what can staff do and what can students do to solve this problem? After the workshop students presented their findings and suggestions to students and staff who then worked together to negotiate a final plan.

## SUPPORTING STUDENT LED RESEARCH

- The purposes of the activities should be in the best interests of the students;
- The purposes of the activities should be transparent and consented to by all participants, including students and staff;
- The activities should be respectful of the students' definitions of the phenomena being examined and incorporate methods that allow for varying levels of skills and ability;
- Students should be active in providing input and advice at each stage of the activities (e.g. planning, design, interpretation, presentation etc.)
- Students should have a voice in determining the implications of the research for appropriate educational policies and practices; and,
- Students should be enabled, by provision of appropriate resources (such as time, space, technologies and materials) to be fully participative in the activities.

**8. STUDENT LED RESEARCH:** At a high school in the Delta School Division (British Columbia) students -including many who don't often have a voice or role in student leadership – participated in the Focus Group Initiative (FGI). The initiative was designed as a classroom and extra-curricular opportunity for students to experience democratic approaches to gathering and responding to students' ideas and opinions about school and learning. Exploring data from the **What did you do in school today?** survey was one of the projects taken on by FGI. In the words of students who led this project, *“We first looked over the results and chose issues that we presumed were the most essential to address. We then devised open-ended questions that would let us know the totality of the student experience. The survey committee from FGI conducted focus groups by grade with a diverse group of students. These randomly selected students helped us to realize the issues that they wanted resolved at North Delta Secondary School. After we had taken into consideration all the results, we put together a presentation complete with student demographics, central ideas about our school, student views, and recommendations. It is truly great to see changes happening because of our recommendations.”* (Education Canada, Winter 2009-10, p. 28-31)



**For more information about *What did you do in school today?* visit:**  
[www.cea-ace.ca/wdydist](http://www.cea-ace.ca/wdydist)