HOW TO

IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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OBJECTIVE

Identifying challenges and opportunities in your community can help you understand one another and build a stronger community. By establishing common ground and gathering input from others, you can determine the supports your community needs to thrive.

One way to gather input is by conducting focus groups and surveys. Data from these collection tools can deepen your understanding of your community and lead you to identify priority issues needing attention. Data can also help persuade decision makers to consider addressing certain issues.

Oregon Student Voice outlines these two data collection tools in this guide. Effective implementation of these tools can lead to positive and beneficial outcomes.

CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP

Bringing together a small group to engage around certain topics can be an important first step for understanding students' opinions. Focus groups also allow individuals to dig deeper into opportunities and challenges in the community. Here is our advice for conducting a focus group:

1 DESIGN QUESTIONS

General questions are necessary to guide a discussion. Questions can cover specific or large topics depending on the purpose. Feel free to adapt questions based on how the conversation is going.

2 DETERMINE FACILITATORS

Focus groups should have at least two facilitators to lead the discussion. One to ask the questions and drive the discussion, and another to take notes and jump in to ask clarifying questions when appropriate.

3 INVITE PARTICIPANTS

Focus groups should be no larger than 10 students. Select participants that are representative of an entire community and not just one population. Effective focus groups include participants who hold diverse opinions.

4 CREATE AN INCLUSIVE SPACE

It is crucial for students to feel that their thoughts are respected and heard. Begin the discussion by providing ground rules for the space. If rules are violated, gently interrupt and bring the group back to the rules.

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5 AVOID JUMPING RIGHT IN

To ensure that everyone is comfortable, start the discussion by asking participants' names and a very basic question. Allow time for everyone to speak and then jump into the major topics.

6 AUDIO RECORD AND/OR TAKE NOTES

Ask for permission to record the conversation to accurately capture students' opinions. Throughout the conversation, take detailed notes just in case the recording is corrupted.

7 INCLUDE EVERYONE

Participants may not always answer your question right away. If there is silence, count to 30 in your head before asking another question. There will also be talkers and non-talkers in your group. If someone is talking a lot, try to guide the conversation by asking someone else a question. If someone is not talking, ask them a question.

8 ANALYZE AND SHARE RESULTS

Following the discussion, be sure to transcribe the audio recording and incorporate your notes. Analyze the transcription to capture themes around the topics that were discussed and pull out key quotes from the participants. Write up a short report to share based on the analysis and identify recommendations for change in the future!

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ADMINISTER A SURVEY

Surveys are a quick way to understand the opinions of many students. It is important that a user-friendly survey is created that captures the opinions of individuals. Here is our advice for administering a survey:

1 DETERMINE YOUR TOPICS

Surveys that cover a wide range of topics are often less effective. Your survey should cover no more than 5 topics that you are striving to understand. Determine topics based on your group's interest or based on data from a previous focus group.

2 CHOOSE A TOOL

Administer a survey online or by paper. Online surveys are easier for students to take on their phones and faster to analyze the results. Google Forms is an excellent survey tool. It produces an easy to understand graphic report for survey results.

3 ASK CLEAR AND DIRECT QUESTIONS

Be sure to construct questions that address one topic. Questions should be no longer than one sentence. This makes it easier for students to comprehend what is being asked.

4 KEEP IT SHORT AND SIMPLE

Students have limited time to commit to a long survey. Try to keep the survey under 20 questions or 5 minutes for administration.

5 AVOID BIASED QUESTIONS

Ensure not to incorporate your opinion when writing questions. Effective surveys have questions in a positive format. Avoid words like no, not, and never. If you are unsure if your question is biased, have a friend read it!

6 SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE

Do not create a survey in which the diction is above the level of respondents. When a student does not understand the meaning of a word, it may cause students to not answer accurately.

7 USE THE SAME SCALE

Scale responses are an easy way to quickly answer questions. Use a Likert scale, which is typically a five point scale that allows respondents to express how much they agree or disagree with a statement. Be sure to define the meaning of the numbers and use the same scale throughout the survey.

8 BORROW QUESTIONS

It is helpful to use past survey questions. These questions have already been vetted. You can also compare your survey results to past results. For example questions, check out Oregon Student Voice's State of Our Schools report on our website: www.oregonstudentvoice.org/amplify.

9 SHARE THE RESULTS

Once you have received enough respondents, which should be at least 100 students, analyze the results. Do not forget to share the results with your community.

By conducting focus groups and/or surveys, you can understand the needs of your community and help create a positive environment for students to express themselves. Building a strong community is critical to school success, and diverse student thought can strengthen the relationship between administrators and students.

CONTACT US

oregonstudentvoice@gmail.com
www.oregonstudentvoice.org

Written by:
Sarah Ali

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