



## Facilitating Focus Groups for Program Evaluation

Gifted program **evaluation** and **accountability** are provisions of the Exceptional Children’s Education Act (ECEA). Soliciting input from stakeholders is part of a continuous program evaluation process. Collecting “periodic feedback” from stakeholders is one of the defined methods in regulations for self-evaluation and review of the gifted program plan. Stakeholders can include: parents, families, teachers, administrators, and students of an administrative unit (AU). AU means a school district, a board of cooperative services (BOCES), or the state Charter School Institute.

The AU determines the schedule and methods for collecting program information and communicates that information with stakeholders. ECEA rules state an AU shall inform parents, educators, and other required persons about their method(s) for periodic feedback.  
[12.02(2)(i)(iv-v)]

How and when administrative units collect feedback may vary. Gathering and providing results of stakeholder feedback is a required component of the **Colorado Gifted Education Review** (CGER). AUs determine a method for collecting periodic feedback and summarize key results in the Data Management System (DMS) as part of the AU’s Self-Evaluation. Beyond the CGER process, analysis of stakeholder data aids the AU in identifying program strengths and areas for improvement.

Surveys and focus groups are two methods frequently used by AUs to solicit stakeholder feedback. A **survey** may be disseminated to collect feedback, and/or **focus groups** may be held to collect valuable information about the gifted program plan. This guidance document addresses focus groups; more information about conducting a gifted program survey can be found on the [Evaluation and Accountability webpage](http://www.cde.state.co.us/gt/evaluation).  
<http://www.cde.state.co.us/gt/evaluation>

### WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

A focus group is a gathering of deliberately selected stakeholders who participate in a planned discussion to elicit perceptions about a specific topic or area of interest. A focus group includes 5-10 members who typically share common interests or characteristics. The group is brought together by a moderator who guides and observes participants in order to gain information about a specific issue. Participants interact and influence each other during the discussion and consideration of perspectives.

A focus group provides an alternative, more personal approach to obtaining information about a gifted program plan. Whereas survey data tends to be more “scientific” in terms of collected and reported data, focus groups can gather

## Collecting Stakeholder Feedback

Periodic feedback, unlike student progress monitoring, is in regard to program evaluation of the ECEA program elements. Evaluation means seeking input from administrators, teachers, parents and students on procedures, methods, and/or tools used to implement program elements.

*Evaluation includes: Identifying the priorities and concerns of the child’s family and resources to which the family and the child’s school have access; determining program strengths and areas for program improvement; identifying strengths, interests, and needs; and monitoring the child’s academic achievement and growth and affective goals [12.01(5)].*



information that is more authentic, detailed and descriptive. The purpose of a focus group is not to arrive at a consensus or agreement, nor is it to make recommendations or decisions about future action steps. It is designed to identify feelings, perceptions and thinking of specific stakeholder groups. Participants are able to interact and hear responses of others. Focus group discussions provide an opportunity for the AU to verify evidence of gifted program elements from a variety of stakeholders as seen through a specific lens.

### WHO PARTICIPATES IN A FOCUS GROUP?

The quality of information obtained from a focus group is dependent on the **moderator** of the group and the **participants** who have been selected. The AU Gifted Coordinator/Director, in conjunction with AU and school leadership, invites and schedules stakeholders to participate in the information gathering process.

#### **Moderator**

The AU selects a moderator who is non-biased and is not perceived as the leader or administrator of the gifted program, school or district. Moderators are professional, non-judgmental and foster open, friendly communication. The moderator asks questions of the group and probes for a deeper level of understanding when necessary. The moderator may also find it necessary to interact with a specific member of the group who is monopolizing time or does not understand the intent or purpose of the group.

#### **Co-facilitator/Note-taker**

The AU identifies a person who will be the co-facilitator and/or note-taker. A co-facilitator does not guide or moderate the discussion but is available to welcome members and keep time. This person also takes notes during the discussion and debriefs with the moderator in order to provide an additional perspective.

The note-taker often sits away from the group and does not actively participate in the discussion. Notes should be detailed and record specific quotes from the group. Participants should know there is a note-taker, but no names will be used in the reporting of data collected during the discussion.

Sometimes AUs choose to record the group to make sure nothing is missed. However, if you intend to record the focus group, clearly indicate that in your invitation to members.

#### **Participants**

It is important that groups are representative of the AU's population and protocols are followed to elicit objective and honest feedback from participants. In order to benefit the AU's improvement efforts, consider these guiding practices when selecting participants:

- Invite participants who include a wide array of perspectives and viewpoints. While it might be tempting to identify only those stakeholders who are active and strong supporters of the AU gifted program, it does not maximize the insights that can emerge from these discussions.
- Some AUs choose to send out a general email or newsletter announcement inviting stakeholders to participate in a focus group. The AU then invites specific individuals who responded to the announcement. This can have unintended consequences if members possess strong opinions one way or another and may lead to biased results.
- Stakeholders should collectively represent the following:
  - The AU's broader community: *socio-economic levels, ethnicity, regions served by the AU, etc.;*
  - Provide a range of AU viewpoints and perspectives: *strong, active supporters, critics, those who are less involved, etc.;*
  - Represent all schooling levels in the Administrative Unit: *pre-K to career/technical, if applicable;*



- Represent all major positions in the AU: *leadership, administrative, teaching, guidance, and support*;
- Include individuals who are knowledgeable of the AU's efforts in Gifted Education; and
- Include individuals who can discuss the strengths and challenges the Administrative Unit wishes the team to understand.

#### HOW DO WE PLAN FOR A FOCUS GROUP?

- Send invitations to participants 2-4 weeks prior to the designated meeting time. It is helpful to confirm attendance and follow-up with a reminder one or two days prior to the meeting time.
- Obtain parent permission for students who will be participating in a focus group.
- Provide a comfortable, non-threatening setting for participants. Some AUs choose to use a community building, like a public library, rather than a school location for parent focus groups.
- Consider providing bottled water and light snacks to heighten the comfort level of participants.
- Provide nametags/name tents for all participants.
- Determine discussion norms prior to the meeting and have them printed and posted in the room.
- Arrange seating in a circle to support open communication. If participants will be seated at a table, it is preferable to have one large table where participants can see one another.
- Have a set of predetermined questions that will be asked of the group. A set of suggested questions has been developed to support reliable gifted program evaluation and can be found at the end of this document.
- Establish and communicate a designated end time. A visible clock is helpful.

#### ROLES OF THE MODERATOR:

- Begin with making introductions.
- Share the purpose of the group.
- Set the discussion norms. Some common norms might include:
  - No right or wrong answer – only different points of view;
  - Only one person speaks at a time;
  - Everyone participates;
  - We will be taking notes of your responses;
  - Your names will not appear in our report; and
  - Listen respectfully to one another.
- Ask the first question and use pauses and probes to seek clarity or gather additional information.
- Control reactions to responses by avoiding head nodding, facial expressions or verbal responses.
- Use subtle control of the group by limiting the dominant talkers and encouraging the shy participants.
- At the end of the session:
  - Summarize and confirm the purpose of the group;
  - Ask if there is any additional information to be shared;
  - Guide participants who have specific concerns to the appropriate personnel; and
  - Thank participants for their time and input.
- Debrief with moderator when all participants have exited.



### ROLES OF THE CO-FACILITATOR/NOTE-TAKER:

- Assist the moderator with the meeting set-up.
- Engage in purposeful interaction as participants arrive to create a warm, friendly atmosphere.
- Take detailed notes during the session.
- Operate equipment if recording the session.
- Keep time of session and provide a ten minute warning to moderator and group.
- Do not participate in discussion either verbally or non-verbally.
- Debrief with moderator.
- Give feedback for analysis and final report.

### WHAT IS A SUGGESTED PURPOSE TO SHARE WITH THE FOCUS GROUP?

A moderator may choose to share the following paragraph:

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in today's focus group session. You were selected for this group because of the knowledge and insight you can share about your district's/AU's gifted program. We appreciate your active participation today. We highly value your perceptions, thoughts and opinion on this important topic. Today's session will be approximately \_\_\_\_\_ minutes long. A critical component of continuous improvement is to gather information from district and school stakeholders through the use of focus groups. Today's discussion will provide our district/AU with the opportunity to verify information from your lens about the district's current gifted education program. We will take the information shared today and use it to assist us in creating our overall report of the district's/AU's gifted education program. This report will assist the district/AU to further its continuous improvement efforts. Please know that specific names will not be included in this report to protect anonymity and the confidentiality of our process.*

### GUIDELINES FOR MODERATING A DISCUSSION:

#### Useful probes:

- Can you talk more about that?
- Would you explain further?
- Would you give an example?
- Help me understand what you mean.

#### Challenging Participants:

- Self-appointed expert: "Thank you. What do other people think?"
- The dominator: "Let's hear some other comments."
- The rambler: Stop eye contact and look at watch or clock. "To honor our time, I am going to move us forward to the next question."
- The shy participant: Make eye contact. Smile. Call on them. \_\_\_\_\_ would you care to share your thoughts?
- The quiet talker: "Could I ask you speak a little louder so we can all hear your response."

#### Summarize or Paraphrase:

- "So what I am hearing is..."
- "Am I correct in concluding that..."
- "The multiple opinions shared include ..."
- "Your primary observation/opinion/belief is..."



- “You would best describe/explain/conclude that...”

#### GUIDELINES FOR TAKING NOTES:

- Consistency and clarity are essential;
- Listen for notable quotes that illustrate a point of view;
- Pay attention to key phrases;
- Use ... (3 periods) to show parts of the quote is missing or not included;
- Record key terms, descriptors or themes;
- If the same idea or opinion is repeated, use tally marks to indicate frequency;
- Record any new guiding questions that were asked that were not part of the pre-determined script;
- Make note of factors which might aid analysis;
- Note body language of participants;
- Note non-verbal activity;
- Indicate agreement of majority or minority of participants; and
- Describe the tone, mood or emotions of group/individual.

#### GUIDELINES FOR ANALYZING THE DATA:

When analyzing the data collected during a focus group, consider the following:

- **WORDS:** Think about actual words used by participants and the meaning of those words. Do the different words used reflect the same ideas and themes or do they contradict one another?
- **CONTEXT:** Was there a trigger in a question that caused participants to react in a given way – either verbally or non-verbally? Consider the tone and intensity of comments.
- **INTERNAL CONSISTENCY:** Participants will sometimes change views or reverse positions after listening to others. When a shift occurs, trace the flow of the conversation to determine explanations for the change.
- **FREQUENCY OR ELABORATION:** Some questions elicit more discussion than others (elaboration) and some comments are made more often throughout the session (frequency). Make note of questions or topics that had an extensive level of response and those that occurred frequently during the session. Consider what was not said or did not receive any attention.
- **INTENSITY:** Occasionally, participants talk about a topic with intensity. With session notes alone, intensity is often difficult to spot. It is important that during the note-taker records a tone of voice, gestures and words that received a greater level of emphasis.
- **SPECIFICITY:** Responses that are specific and based on experience should be given more weight than those that are vague, based on hearsay or impersonal. Did the participant support a response by providing a specific detail or example?
- **FINDING BIG IDEAS:** During the final analysis of the focus group generalize the findings into a central, overarching theme(s) or big ideas.

#### GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING A REPORT:

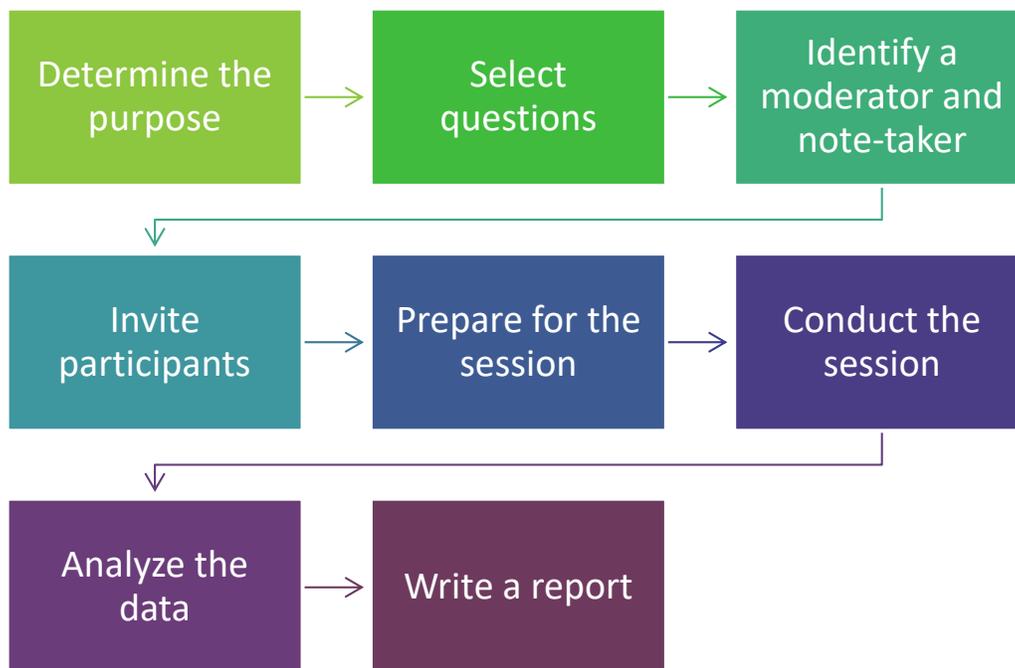


Preparing a report on a focus group requires taking the above considerations and summarizing information into a clear, succinct and concise format. Grouping responses into major themes or discussion topics may be helpful. Use specific quotes of participants when possible to illustrate key concepts or ideas. In some cases, discussion information may be quantified. For example, indicate the number of participants who responded in one way or held a certain belief. Reports are not judgmental nor do they make recommendations for future change. They objectively report the information shared during the discussion.

Based on all the responses, a report might include:

- Top 3-5 programming strengths;
- Top 3-5 issues or concerns;
- Common themes or interpretations; and/or
- Common responses.

**STEPS FOR CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP:**





## Possible Focus Group Questions

Element	Parent	Student	Teacher	Administrator
<b>Identification</b>	<p>How did you become aware of the gifted program in your district?</p> <p>Describe the process for identifying your child as a gifted learner?</p> <p>What criteria were used?</p> <p>How were you part of the process?</p>	<p>How and when were you identified as a gifted learner?</p> <p>In what areas are you identified?</p>	<p>What is the process and criteria for gifted identification in your district/school?</p> <p>In what areas are students identified?</p>	<p>What is the process and criteria for gifted identification in your district/school?</p> <p>How are teachers and parents part of this process?</p>
<b>ALP</b>	<p>How have you been involved in the goal setting and monitoring of your student's Advanced Learning Plan (ALP)?</p> <p>What are your child's current goals?</p> <p>How do these goals align to your child's strength areas?</p>	<p>How were you part of the development of your ALP?</p> <p>What are your current ALP goals?</p> <p>How do you monitor your goal progress during the year?</p>	<p>How are you a part of the ALP development for your gifted students?</p> <p>How are goals created?</p> <p>What is the process for monitoring goal progress throughout the year?</p>	<p>Describe the development of the ALP?</p> <p>Who is primarily responsible for the ALPs?</p> <p>Are gifted students seen as a shared responsibility within the school?</p>
<b>Programming</b>	<p>Describe the type of programming options your child receives?</p> <p>How is programming matched to your child's strengths and/or interests?</p> <p>Does your child feel challenged?</p>	<p>Describe the different types of classes, activities, or projects made available to you as a result of your gifted identification.</p> <p>Do you feel challenged?</p> <p>Do the opportunities match your strength areas and interests?</p>	<p>Describe the type of programming provided to gifted students within the school/district?</p> <p>How are programming options aligned to a student's strength and interest areas?</p> <p>How are data points used to develop programming options?</p>	<p>Describe the type of programming provided to gifted students within the school/district?</p> <p>How are programming options aligned to a student's strength and interest areas?</p> <p>How are data points used to develop programming options?</p>



Element	Parent	Student	Teacher	Administrator
<b>Communication</b>	<p>How does the school/district communicate with you about your child’s gifted programming and ALP and progress throughout the year? Describe what type of opportunities are available to support parents of gifted students.</p> <p>What resources are available to parents to learn more about gifted education?</p>	<p>How do you learn about different gifted opportunities available to you? How does the school communicate with you about your ALP development? If you have a question or concern about your gifted programming, do you know who to talk to in your school?</p>	<p>How do you communicate with parents about their child’s progress throughout the year? How do you receive information about your district’s gifted programming? What type of professional development is available to support teachers’ understanding of gifted education? What resources are available to teachers to learn more about gifted education?</p>	<p>How do you communicate with parents, students and teachers about gifted programming? How does the district communicate with you about gifted education? What resources are available to administrators, teachers and parents to learn more about gifted education?</p>
<b>Evaluation, Accountability &amp; Budget</b>	<p>What is the process used in your district to evaluate your gifted program? How can parents provide input in the evaluation process? In what ways are you involved in the Gifted budget process or know where to find information about the gifted budget?</p>	<p>How do you monitor your achievement and growth? How can you measure your success? Describe how you give input on your learning goals and how your education plan is meeting your gifted needs.</p>	<p>What is the process used in your district to evaluate the gifted program? How are teachers part of that process? How do you know a gifted student is achieving and growing?</p>	<p>What is the process that your school uses to self-evaluate your gifted program? How do you monitor student growth and achievement? In what ways are you involved with the setting of GT priorities for the budget?</p>

Drs. Neumeister and Burney have developed a set of interview questions that might be used for the purpose of focus groups. These can be found in their book, *Gifted Program Evaluation: A Handbook for Administrators and Coordinators*.