



IDAHO MASTERY EDUCATION NETWORK

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

This focus group protocol aims to understand how students are experiencing mastery education practices as described in the Mastery Learning Framework. The protocol is intended to help you gather insights, perspectives, and points of confusion to support future work at your school and in IMEN cohorts. The guiding questions can also be customized depending on the unique needs, challenges, and victories of your unique group of students.

Conducting the Focus Groups

In order to understand how students are experiencing mastery education as conceptualized in the Mastery Learning Framework and Staging Guide, it is important that you create an environment that fosters community, discussion, honesty, and reflection. Begin with the general questions provided below, and then add customized questions that are general as well as specific to the 5 levels of the Logic Model. Sample questions for these 5 different levels are provided below. You are encouraged to use your discretion and understanding of the group to customize the questions asked and to determine the amount of time spent discussing each question.

Moderation tips:

Begin your focus group by sharing a bit about yourself and your goals for this focus group.

- The purpose of this focus group is to stimulate a discussion about:
 - How you experience and feel about your learning at this school
 - Where you feel supported and where you have concerns about your school or your education
 - How you understand the ideas and goals of mastery education
 - Any additional feedback you have

Allow students to share a bit about themselves as well before you get started:

- This will allow for different people to warm up to communicating in this space and add a sense of familiarity between people who are there in case they do not know each other well
- Example prompts include: Name, years at the school, favorite thing to do outside of school, something you're looking forward to right now, etc.

Let students know that confidentiality is a fundamental part of focus groups:

- Nothing that is shared during the focus group will be individually attributed to anyone in future discussions, reiterations, or changes to this model
- Encourage students to also keep what is shared in the focus group to themselves to maintain the confidentiality and honesty of the environment intact



Sometimes, certain voices or opinions can dominate a focus group. To get a full range of opinions and encourage folks to share, try the following:

- After asking a question, and even after certain folks have answered a question, allow silence to exist. Wait before further prompting students to allow for those who are gathering their thoughts or more reserved to speak.
- If someone shares an idea, ask follow up questions, such as “Does anyone else have a similar experience or perspective that they would like to talk about? How about anyone who has a different take on this issue?”
- If you notice that someone has been quiet for a while or perhaps seems disengaged, ask them if there is anything they would like to add during one of those silent moments.

Remain neutral in order to allow folks to answer openly and honestly:

- Do your best to minimize your facial responses and reactions to things that folks say
- If there is a period of silence after you ask a question, do not begin to answer it based on how you feel. Allow for students to sit in silence to think about how they feel and how they would answer the question

Because you may be conducting many different focus groups:

- Make sure that you are asking the same question to all of the groups to get a good understanding of various opinions around the same topics and discussion points
- If you are recording, make sure that your recording tools can capture the voices of everyone in the room based on how they are positioned
- If possible, have a flipchart or some type of board ready where you can write down key points and thoughts that folks are bringing up
 - Sometimes, having a visual guide can help members of the focus group think through what has been said and what they would like to add
 - This will also allow for personal reflection during the focus group

Protocol (General Questions)

Follow along below to see the general questions to ask during this focus group. If there is a long silence after any of these, feel free to prompt the students by asking a sub-question or adding in your own follow up question to encourage sharing. It may be helpful to have copies of the logic model available.

1. How would you describe your learning experiences at this school?
2. What does mastery education mean to you? What does it bring to mind?
 - a. How is mastery education different than other approaches to learning?
3. What kinds of support do you have in your classrooms?
4. Do you feel like you can be yourself in school? Why or why not?



5. How are learning objectives and expectations communicated by your teachers? How do you show your teachers what you know and can do with what you are learning?
6. Do you have choices in what or how you learn? What kinds of learning options do you have ?
7. How do you get feedback on your work and progress from your teachers?
8. Do you collaborate with your peers while learning and/or when completing performance tasks? If so how and what makes a good collaboration experience?

Protocol (Sample Questions for Various Levels of Logic Model)

Here, we provide some examples that are specific to each level of the logic model. We understand that based on your individual school demographics and needs, students will need varying levels of support and have different feedback, and so we advise that specific questions are customized to best fit your unique group's needs and focus areas. Remember, you will need to decide which questions to ask in advance and you will not be able to ask all of the questions in one group!

1) Competency Framework

- How do you use the competencies to support your learning?
- When do you use the main competency statements?
- When and how do you use the skills continua of the competencies?

2) Performance-based Assessment System

- Do you have choice about which performance tasks you do or how you approach a performance task? If so, what kinds of choices do you have and how do they affect your learning?
- How often do you do performance tasks? What other kinds of assessments do you take? Which assessments are most valuable to your learning? Why?

3) Responsive Pedagogy in a Flexible Learning Environment

- Does your classroom offer multiple ways to learn and practice content and skills?
- In your classroom, do you have opportunities for analyzing and reflecting on your own work?
- When you get feedback from your teachers, do you feel like you have actionable next steps that will help you improve?
- What role does technology play in your learning?

4) Learner-centered Culture and Curriculum

- How much say do you have in what you are learning about in your school?
- Are you familiar with the learning cycle? If so, how do you use it in your learning?



5) Performance-based Advancement in a Culture of Learning and Growth

- In what ways do you track your own learning growth or progress in your classroom, if any? What supports do your peers or teachers provide?
- Are you able to work at your own pace - slowing down to go over a topic you are struggling with or moving ahead to deeper explorations or new topics when you are ready? If yes, please describe what this experience looks like?
- Do you feel like the adults in the school care about you as a person? About your academic development? About your well-being?
- Are you able to apply what you have learned in meaningful ways outside the school?
- In your learning have you connected with outside community members or partners? How did it happen and what was the result for your learning?

Closing the Focus Group

Remind students that their ideas are very valuable and will be taken into account to better this whole process and model for future work. Share once again that this is all going to be done confidentially, and students can honor confidentiality by not sharing what was discussed in the focus group with other students and refraining from gossip. If the findings from the focus groups will be made public, let the students know what to expect. Thank them for participating and ask if folks have any final questions before ending the group.