

Youth Transitions Focus Groups
Facilitator and Note-taker Guidebook

Boston Private Industry Council
March 2005

Table of Contents

Section	Pages
Project Overview	2-5
Preparation for Groups	6-9
Protocol for Focus Groups	10-15
Question Sets Tailored to Targeted Groups	16-25
Note-taking	26-36
Participant Information Questionnaire	37
Stipend Disbursement Record	38

Goals of Youth Transitions Focus Groups March 8, 2005

The Youth Transitions grant is a strategic planning grant that focuses on struggling students and out-of-school youth. The goal is to conduct research and participate in local systems change efforts that furthers improving the ability of struggling and disconnected youth to transition into successful careers and healthy family and community life. The research in the Boston project will include information on the educational and employment status of teenagers and young adults, educational, and the employment and relevant support services available to them.

The final report will include:

- Quantitative Analysis
- Qualitative Analysis
- Systems Improvements in Progress
- Policy Recommendations

The goal of the project is to identify the need in the youth population, as well as strengths and weakness of the education and employment service delivery system. The Youth and Parent voice component of the program constitute the qualitative analysis and will be critical to helping us get this information. We want to know youth's and parent's experiences with school, work—what they found useful and what they feel is lacking in schools and from Boston's landscape of services. This information will inform the systems improvements the project prioritizes and the policy recommendations we will make.

As we put it in the protocol, our goal is to make recommendations to schools, to local leaders and programs about how to help youth make a successful transition to careers and satisfying adult lives. We are interested in all youth, but have a particular interest in youth who may struggle with school, getting a job, or who may be in state detention or foster care.

We are trying to learn what young adults have to say about all of this. Some of the things we want to hear about are:

- What makes it possible for students to succeed in school and transition to a successful career?
- Why do some struggle with school or leave school?
- What helps students who are struggling stay in school?
- What helps people who drop out come back to school?
- Why don't more people who have dropped out or who need work come to programs to get help?
- What would it take to get young people needing education, training or work to connect with programs?

Youth Transitions Focus Group Process and Timeline

The PIC and a number of partnering organizations have received a national foundation grant to conduct strategic planning around struggling students and disconnected youth. Part of this work involves research on indicators such as the drop-out rate and the youth and young adult employment rates. In order to give dimension to the picture painted by the data, a priority for the project is to conduct youth focus groups for different groups of struggling students and disconnected youth, as well as one or two groups for successful youth, to provide their perspective.

The questions that partners want to ask are: why youth are struggling or why they are disconnected; to what degree are they connected to education, training and support; and what would it take for them to reconnect?

Goal: To conduct and document 12-15 (more if we can) youth focus groups of 10-12 youth each. Youth groups will range from strong students to struggling students to disconnected youth.

Partners: *Youth Service Providers Network (YSPN), Emerging Leaders, PIC, CommCorp.* YSPN is lead on decision-making, staffed by the PIC and CommCorp. Emerging Leaders will take the lead in facilitating the focus groups and recording the youth's comments and observations, with some facilitators and recorders from the PIC and community organizations helping us to increase the number of groups we cover.

YSPN members and other community organizations will assemble groups of targeted youth on dates mutually agreed upon by individual Emerging Leaders and YSPN providers. Emerging Leaders will meet the groups at designated program or school sites. Program staff will sit with the group for the introductory portion of the conversation to provide a comfort zone, then leave the room so that youth may speak frankly. In the cases of clinical populations, such as DYS and DSS, it may be appropriate for program staff to observe the entire session.

Timeline: To complete documentation of focus groups by June 30, 2005.

- Schedule initial focus groups, *Emerging Leaders* (by March 15 to occur by March 31)
- Train Facilitators, *PIC, consultant* (March 7)
- First round of focus groups, *Emerging Leaders* (by March 31)
- Submit first write-up, *Emerging Leaders* (by April 12)
- Re-train facilitators if needed, *PIC* (by April 15)
- Second round of focus groups, *Emerging Leaders, other facilitators* (by April 30)
- Third round of focus groups, *Emerging Leaders*, (by May 30)
- Fourth round of focus groups as needed, *Emerging Leaders, other facilitators* (by June 17)
- Complete and record focus groups; submit write-ups to PIC (by June 30), *Emerging Leaders*
- Write summary and analysis of the focus group results, *CommCorp, with input from CLMS and PIC* (by August 31)

Youth Focus Groups

Targeted Groups

Brief Plan --

Plan is for 10+ groups, about 10 youth per group. Stipends will be offered to participants. Write-ups of individual groups submitted by June 30th. Analysis of all the groups completed by September 1st.

Key Groups to be represented –

1. Youth succeeding in high school, Academy of Public Service
2. GED program participants, GED Plus
3. Pregnant and Parenting Teens, Crittenton Hastings House
4. Re-entry to alternative education, Bridge Over Troubled Waters
5. Disconnected youth –not attached to service, Streetworkers
6. Adjudicated youth, pre-commitment, YO
7. Adjudicated youth , post-commitment, YO
8. In-school alternative education youth (boys only), EDCO Youth Alternative
9. In-school alternative education youth, Notre Dame
10. Latino youth, ABCD
11. Out-of-school youth who failed MCAS, Boston Career Link
12. Out-of-school, out-of-work older youth, BHA
13. In-school struggling students, Hyde Park High
14. Youth in foster care (Home for Little Wanderers is contact)
15. Gay and Lesbian youth, BAGLY
16. Struggling middle school youth, BUYF

Youth Transitions Focus Groups

Information for Facilitator/Note-taker Team to Set Up Focus Group Dates

1. Initial call or email to your youth program contact

- Set date, time, location
- Send flyer template, if needed
- Confirm your target group
- Find out how many youth the site thinks they can get (10-12 is target)
- Talk about group composition—align expectations about specific target group. Unless specialized, encourage diversity of gender, race/ethnicity, degree of engagement in program
- Establish which program staff will attend and how long s/he will stay
- Find out what the meeting space is like and if they have flip charts, markers, pens, etc.
- Find out if you can come early to set up

2. Contact PIC

- Let Kathy know the date, target group and site
- Discuss special considerations in facilitating/recording for this group
- Confirm number of participant stipends you need
- Arrange for any materials you need
- Arrange to get them from PIC prior to the date of focus group

3. Follow-up call (2 days before date of the focus group)

- Establish the number of participants confirmed/expected
- Find out any special characteristics of participants
- Confirm staff who will be present at the group
- Confirm any special arrangements you made (for space, materials, early arrival, etc)

4. Prepare Questions and Materials

- Both facilitator and recorder should familiarize themselves with the questions
- Each of the numbered questions (not sub-questions) should be written on a flip chart sheet and be taped behind or underneath the introductory questions.

5. Day of Focus Group

Before

- Bring question-sheets, blank sheets, markers, pens, tape, 9 x 11 card stock or paper for name tents (unless you have confirmed that programs have the materials)
- Arrive early enough to set up room.

- Ask for your staff contact person—establish how long s/he will remain with group and who to contact if there are problems after staff leave.
- Use your focus group protocol to conduct group and have fun!

Afterwards

- Have each participant fill out demographics questionnaire
- Have each participant print and sign their name on roster
- Distribute stipends after each has signed
- Facilitator and Recorder should consult to verify that they agree on the important points of the conversation

Youth Focus Groups Information for Focus Group Organizer (youth program staff)

We appreciate your time and dedication!

The goal is to organize a group of 10-12 youth 16 or older who *want* to participate in the groups. We want them to understand our purpose, which is to get their feedback on school, employment and programs that connect them to school and or work, particularly why youth participate or not, why they connect or disconnect from school, work or support programs. Their feedback will help us make recommendations for services to better help the youth of Boston transition into successful lives as adults.

Youth will each be paid \$20.00 for their participation at the end of the focus group. The group will be run by a facilitator and a recorder (note-taker). One of them will contact you to set up a date and time for the group.

Please do your best to recruit a good number of students. Unfortunately, we do not have the capacity to reschedule the group if the turnout is bad. The facilitators will still conduct the focus group, even if a small number show up and the youth who do show up will still be paid, but the sample will not represent your youth with the same strength as a group of the recommended size.

We recommend that you have refreshments for the group to help the participants feel comfortable. We will reimburse you for the cost.

To help make sure the group is successful, we have outlined some steps to help prepare for the group. Thank you for your help with this project! If you have questions, please feel free to call Kathy Hamilton at 617-488-1316.

1. Initial call from your facilitator-recorder team

- Set date, time, location
- Get flyer template, if needed
- Confirm your target group
- Confirm how many youth you will organize (10-12)
- Establish which of your staff will attend and how long s/he will stay
- Let facilitator know what the meeting space is like and if you have flip charts, markers, etc. available. *It is best if participants can sit facing each other around a large table or small tables pushed together.*

2. Recruit participants

- Use flyers if you want—your facilitators can email you a template
- Explain goal of group to participants
- Suggestions about getting good turnout:
 - Build on existing structures (classes, activities) when kids are normally present in groups
 - Recruit twice as many as you want
 - Recruit alternates

3. Follow-up call (from facilitator/recorder team 2 days before date of the focus group)

- Let facilitator know the number of participants confirmed/expected
- Confirm staff who will be present at the group
- Confirm any special arrangements made (for space, materials, early arrival, etc)

4. The day before

- Remind youth and staff of focus group
- Make sure room is available and ready

5. Day of Focus Group

Before

- Have your staff contact person available to meet facilitator & recorder
- Confirm how long your program contact will remain in the room with group—we are recommending through the introductions for most groups, though some groups may be more comfortable if staff stay.
- Establish who (and how) to contact if there are problems after your program staff leave
- Rejoin group at scheduled ending time of group to facilitate transition

Afterwards

- Each participant will print and sign their name on roster and fill out an anonymous demographics card
- Facilitator and recorder will distribute cash envelopes after each participant has signed
- Give facilitator or recorder receipts for any refreshments purchased

Youth Focus Group Protocol

ISY and OSY Mixed Youth

4/16, Saturday

ABCD, 178 Tremont St, 3d floor

MATERIALS

Tape
Stipend
Markers (flip & white board)
Flip Chart
Pens
Food
Participant Information Questionnaire
Protocol
Disbursement form
Tent cards

<i>Prep</i>

Post on newsprint/board

Introductions (flip 1)

What's your name?
What programs are you connected with?
What is one thing about that program that has been helpful or useful?

Discussion Questions (flipchart)

1. Are you still in high school?
2. What do you or did you like about high school?
3. What do you or did you dislike about high school?
4. Is there (was there) help available for students that were having a hard time?
5. If you have left school before graduating, why did you leave?

6. If you have left school, did you reconnect with another school or employment program since then?
7. Do you have a career goal?
8. What led you to think about that career goal?
9. Do you know what you will need to do to get there?
10. What additional services or support would help you achieve your goals?

Protocol for running the group

Before the group starts

- Blank tent card at each seat
- Markers

As people arrive and sit down, ask them to write their first name on both sides of the tent card.

OPENING

Thanks for joining us this morning. My name is Adriana and I work with XYZ House and one of the things I do is run focus groups with young adults to figure out what they need to get better connected with education, training and work opportunities that lead them to success.

(Youth program representative(s) name(s), the person/people who referred you to this group are going to sit here during the meeting, just so you have someone familiar in the room.

Lorenzo from The Network is going to take notes and write a report about what you all have to say...but it won't include any of your names. More about confidentiality in a minute—and (Name of observer's present), who is a part of this project, is observing.

That said, I'm going to be acting as the "facilitator" of this focus group.

Any questions so far?

OK. First I want to talk really briefly about why we're doing this group.

We are trying to figure out how to help youth stay in school and succeed and how to better help young people who have left school to get reconnected to education or

employment programs and be successful in their lives. Our goal is to make recommendations to schools, to local leaders and programs about how to help youth make a successful transition to careers and satisfying adult lives. We are interested in all youth, but have a particular interest in youth who may struggle with school, getting a job, or other problems.

We are trying to learn what young adults have to say about all of this. Some of the things we want to hear about are:

- What makes it possible for students to succeed in high school and transition to a successful career?
- Why do some struggle with school or leave school?
- What helps people who drop out come back to school?
- What do young adults think they need more of to help them become successful?

We can't answer these questions ourselves. Yes, we can count how many of you get diplomas and jobs and what kinds of programs there are for youth. But we don't know how it feels to be you. We don't know any of that unless we ask you.

So this group is our opportunity to ask you...and listen. So that's what we're going to do over the next hour or so.

Any questions now?

OK. Then I have just two rules I want to tell you about and we'll all very briefly say who we are and then we'll talk a bit.

First rule is that whatever we say here is **confidential**. Here's what that means. After this group, if you want to talk to anyone about some of the ideas that might have come up here...or even some of the feelings that people had....you can do that. **But you can't say who said what or who was in the group.**

Why?

Because we need you to be completely honest about what we talk about. We want to do everything we can to help young adults like yourselves be successful in school, at work, in life. One of the ways we think we can do that is by learning about your experiences—good and bad--with school, work, probation, and about what you need to succeed. Some of this information can feel personal and you would not want it repeated about you outside of this room.

So that's why we have confidentiality. The only way we think people can be as honest as we need them to be is to ask that you not mention names if you choose to talk about anything that happened here.

I also mentioned that Lorenzo is going to write a report about what we discuss. S/he doesn't mention names either. S/he talks about the ideas that the group talked about.

So that's the first rule –it's so important I wanted to take the time to explain it.

The next rule is: **one person speaks at a time.**

And if more than one person is speaking at a time, it's my job to remind everyone of that rule. And I will.

So that's it for telling you about why we're doing the group and the rules. Any questions?

PROCESS/AGENDA

First we're going to do what we call "**Introductions.**" We'll go around the room and ask you to say your name (I know they're on your tent cards but it helps those of us taking notes and running the group for you to say them out loud too), what program you are in and one thing about that program that has been helpful. I think you are all in YO, which is a program, but if you are also in another program for education or training or support, please feel free to mention that program as well.

This is just a brief go around.

General Discussion: Then we have about 10 "Discussion Questions" that ask about your experiences with school, education, employment and probation, specifically, what about them worked for you and what did not.

Are there any questions before we get started?

OK. Then let's get started.

Introductions

[**Remind** that this is just a **brief** Introduction.]

[Go around the group and have each person answer each question.]

1. What's your name?
2. What extracurricular programs are you connected with?
3. What is one thing about that program that has been helpful or useful?

Discussion Questions

In answering these next questions, we're not going to go around the room. If you want to answer, just raise your hand. But we will go through each question separately because it's easier for the note taker. And again, please, let's just have one person speak at a time. Anyone want to answer question #1.

1. Are you still in high school?
2. What do you or did you like about high school?
3. What do you or did you dislike about high school?
4. Is there (was there) help available for students that were having a hard time?
 - a. Is it (was it) the kind of help you need?
5. If you left school before graduating, why did you leave?
 - How did you leave?
 - Sign out
 - Put in detention or jail
 - Meet with counselor
 - Told about other options
 - Just stopped coming
 - What caused you to leave?
 - Personal reasons or responsibilities,
 - If you are comfortable sharing what were they?
 - Something about the school you did not like
 - If yes, what?
 - Did you seek help or was help offered before you left?
6. If you left school (either dropped out or graduated), did you reconnect with another school, education or training program since then?
 - If so, what type of program?
 - How did you hear about the program?
 - What made you decide to enroll?
 - What made it easy or difficult to get connected to the program?
 - How is it different from your previous school experience?
 - What has made you stay?
7. Do you have a career goal?

8. What led you to think about that career goal?
 - Have you worked before? What kind? Has this helped you think about your future?
 - What do family members or relatives do for a living?
 - Are you influenced by or interested in jobs that they have?
9. Do you know what will you need to do to get there?
 - What help or support do you have at this time?
10. What additional services or support would help you achieve your goals?

Close

I need you to fill out a brief form that is anonymous, just so we have a sense of the age, ethnicity, gender and neighborhood representation of the group [Pass out forms and pens if necessary].

Then the last thing I'd like to do is pay you for your time. We value your time and everyone is receiving \$20. As you receive your envelope, please print your name and then sign your name on this list. Signing your name tells our accountants that you received your \$20.

[Pass out envelopes and have youth sign roster/disbursement form verifying receipt of payment as they get their envelopes.]

[Thank the group for their participation, their time and for their contribution to improving the centers. Acknowledge the usefulness of the information and caliber of discussion.]

[For best recording of notes, it is helpful for the note-taker and the facilitator to get together directly after the session to compare notes about the major messages communicated in the focus group.]

Youth Focus Group Questions
Tailored for Different Targeted Groups

For Out-of-School Youth (connected to some sort of program):

1. How did you hear about the program you are in now?
 - School teacher or counselor
 - Other counselor (CBO, career center, YMCA, etc)
 - Newspaper, flyer or TV
 - Parents or Relatives
 - Other
 - What made you decide to enroll?
 - What made it easy to get into the program?
...or, if it was hard,
 - What made it hard to get into the program?

2. How is your current program different from your previous school experience?
 - What has made you stay?

3. How long were you out of school before starting this program?
 - What grade were you in when you left?
 - What have you done since you left?
 - Work
 - School
 - Training
 - Cared for family member

4. Why did you leave school?
 - How did you leave?
 - Sign out
 - Meet with counselor
 - Told about other options
 - Just stopped coming
 - What caused you to leave?
 - Personal reasons or responsibilities,
 - If you are comfortable sharing what were they?
 - Something about the school you did not like
 - If yes, what?

- Did you seek help or was help offered before you left?
5. When you think about your future, what do you see yourself doing?
- Do you have a career goal?
 - What led you to think about that?
 - Have you worked before? What kind? Has this helped you think about your future?
 - What do family members or relatives do for a living?
 - Are you influenced by or interested in jobs that they have?
 - Do you know what will you need to do to get there?
 - What help or support do you have at this time?
6. What additional services or support would help you achieve your goals?
- Education:
 - Alternative education
 - GED
 - Better connections to college
 - other
 - Work-Readiness Training
 - Employment
 - Job Skills Training
 - Help with personal development (personal problem-solving, leadership)
 - Help staying focused
 - Other
7. What can we do to get more out-of-school youth to connect with education or employment programs?
- Why don't more youth try to connect with these programs?

For Out-of-School Youth (not connected to a program):

1. What are you doing now?

- Work
- Caring for family member
- Recreational activities
- Nothing in particular

2. Why did you leave school?

- How did you leave?
 - Sign out
 - Meet with counselor
 - Told about other options
 - Just stopped coming
- What caused you to leave?
 - Personal reasons or responsibilities,
 - If you are comfortable sharing what were they?
 - Something about the school you did not like
 - If yes, what?
- Did you seek help or was help offered before you left?

3. When you think about your future, what do you see yourself doing?

- Do you have a career goal?
- What led you to think about that?
- Have you worked before? What kind? Has this helped you think about your future?
- What do family members or relatives do for a living?
- Are you influenced by or interested in jobs that they have?
- Do you know what will you need to do to get there?
- What help or support do you have at this time?

4. What would it take for you to connect with an education, training or employment program?

- What do you need?
 - A diploma
 - More academic skills (better reading or math ability)
 - Occupational Training
 - A job
- What type of support do you need?
 - Someone to advise on education or careers
 - Someone to help with personal problems
 - Someone to listen

For in-school youth (succeeding):

1. Describe your high school experience (what grade, what schools attended in past)
 - What do you like about high school?
 - What do you dislike about high school?
 - What has helped you be successful in high school?
 - What does being successful in high school mean?

2. Do you know students who are struggling in school?
 - Why are they having trouble?
 - Is there help for people who have trouble? What kind (specifically) do you know about?
 - Is the help the right kind of help?
 - Do you know students who have dropped out?
 - Why did they leave?

3. When you think about your future, what do you see yourself doing?
 - Do you have a career goal?
 - What led you to think about that?
 - Have you worked before? What kind? Has this helped you think about your future?
 - What do family members or relatives do for a living?
 - Are you influenced by or interested in jobs that they have?
 - Do you know what will you need to do to get there?
 - What help or support do you have at this time?

4. What can be done to help more students succeed in school and plan for a career?

For in-school youth (struggling):

1. Describe your high school experience (same as above)
 - What do you like about high school?
 - What do you dislike about high school?
 - How are you doing in high school?

2. If you are having trouble (with MCAS or grades or attendance or credits), is there help available to you?
 - What, if anything are you struggling with in school?
 - Are you getting help for the issues?
 - Why or why not?
 - If you are in a program or getting help, is it helping you address the problems?
 - If so, why o
 - If not, why not?

3. When you think about your future, what do you see yourself doing?
 - Do you have a career goal?
 - What led you to think about that?
 - Have you worked before? What kind? Has this helped you think about your future?
 - What do family members or relatives do for a living?
 - Are you influenced by or interested in jobs that they have?
 - Do you know what will you need to do to get there?
 - What help or support do you have at this time?

4. What would it take to help you complete school successfully and/or plan for a career?

For Adjudicated Youth on Probation

1. If you are still in school, describe your high school experience.

- Are you still in high school?
- If so, how is it going?
- What do you like?
- What do you dislike?
- Is there help available?
- Is it the kind of help you need?

2. If you have left school, why did you leave?

- How did you leave?
 - Sign out
 - Meet with counselor
 - Told about other options
 - Just stopped coming
- What caused you to leave?
 - Personal reasons or responsibilities,
 - If you are comfortable sharing what were they?
 - Something about the school you did not like
 - If yes, what?
- Did you seek help or was help offered before you left?

3. If you have left school, did you reconnect with another school or education program since then?

- If so, what type of program?
- How did you hear about the program?
- What appealed to you about the program?
- What made it easy or difficult to get connected to the program?
- How is it different from your public school experience?
- What has made you stay?

4. Do you have access to education or employment program—or other help—through your probation officer?

- Have you become involved in any new education or employment programs since you started probation?
- How would you describe your level of supervision? (Intense, low, moderate, high)
- Do you feel the supervision helps keep you focused?
- Does your probation status allow you to go to outside programs, such as YOB?
- If so, are there connections between your probation officer and the program?
- Has your probation officer assisted you in your educational interests?
- Has your probation officer assisted you in your pursuit of employment?
- Has your probation officer assisted you find other programs?
- If so, how?

5. Do you feel like you are at a better place now than when you were first on probation?

- If so, how?
- If not, why not

6. When you think about your future, what do you see yourself doing?

- Do you have a career goal?
- What led you to think about that?
- Have you worked before? What kind? Has this helped you think about your future?
- What do family members or relatives do for a living?
- Are you influenced by or interested in jobs that they have?
- Do you know what will you need to do to get there?
- What help or support do you have at this time?

7. What additional services or support would help you at this time?

For Adjudicated Youth in Detention

1. If you are still in school, describe your high school experience.
 - Are you still in high school?
 - If so, how is it going?
 - What do you like?
 - What do you dislike?
 - Is there help available?
 - Is it the kind of help you need?

2. If you have left school, why did you leave?
 - How did you leave?
 - Sign out
 - Meet with counselor
 - Told about other options
 - Just stopped coming
 - What caused you to leave?
 - Personal reasons or responsibilities,
 - If you are comfortable sharing what were they?
 - Something about the school you did not like
 - If yes, what?
 - Did you seek help or was help offered before you left?

3. If you have left school, did you reconnect with another school or education program?
 - If so, what type of program?
 - How did you hear about the program?
 - What appealed to you about the program?
 - What made it easy or difficult to get connected to the program?
 - How is it different from your public school experience?
 - What has made you stay?

4. Do you have access to education or employment program—or other help—through your probation officer?
 - Have you become involved in any new education or employment programs since you were committed to DYS?
 - How would you describe your current level of supervision from your DYS case worker? (Intense, low, moderate, high)
 - Do you feel the supervision helps keep you focused?
 - Does your DYS status allow you to go to outside programs, such as YOB?
 - If so, are there connections between your case worker and the program?
 - Has your case worker assisted you in your educational interests?
 - Has your case worker assisted you in your pursuit of employment?
 - Has your case worker assisted you find other programs?
 - If so, how?

5. Do you feel like you are at a better place now than when you were first on probation or committed?

- If so, how?
- If not, why not?

6. When you think about your future, what do you see yourself doing?

- Do you have a career goal?
- What led you to think about that?
- Have you worked before? What kind? Has this helped you think about your future?
- What do family members or relatives do for a living?
- Are you influenced by or interested in jobs that they have?
- Do you know what will you need to do to get there?
- What help or support do you have at this time?

8. What additional services or support would help you at this time?

NOTE TAKING TIPS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Make a seating chart

While people are taking seats and making out tent cards, make a map of the table and the location of each customer (initials work well). This allows the report writer to know when the speaker changes, allowing him/her to count the number of repetitions of a particular opinion. Entering that information in a database provides quantitative information about the session.

Record comments as heard

To the extent possible, record the dialogue exactly as it happens, using whatever shorthand or abbreviations are easiest.¹ There are two reasons for this. First, it is nearly impossible to process conversation in real time and pull out themes or abstract concepts. Second, because the original sense of the comments must be retained in the report, it is essential to refer back to the dialogue while writing so that the report preserves the original meaning of customers' statements.

Capture quotes

Recording dialogue verbatim also allows the report writer to add direct quotations where the comment illustrates a point especially well. For example, when describing customers' opinions of staff as "helpful and attentive", or "inattentive and bored," it is more meaningful to include quotes such as "*The counselors here can't do enough for you,*" or "*The staff seems like they're just there to collect a paycheck.*"

Take notes in the leader's format for the session

Review the format before the session if possible. However, be flexible when the discussion wanders from the format. *Career Center* focus groups often include the following components:

- 1) Introductions (including name, services and/or locations used, how the customer found the resource, what services the customer has used.
- 2) Strengths/positives of the product(s) and/or service(s). ("What have you liked..." "What has the [resource] done well," etc.)
- 3) Weaknesses/negatives: ("*What has not met your expectations...*," "*What haven't you liked...*," etc.)
- 4) Suggestions for improvement

Come prepared

Bring several pens, plenty of paper, coffee, etc. The note taker cannot get up during the session.

¹ Exceptions to this may include the use of staff names (the policy on this will be determined by the leader), and obviously irrelevant comments.

Report Guidelines.

The Response Record

Please complete the excel sheet to give us numbers of responses. Use the Participant Information Questionnaire to complete Section A. You should be able to include all the participants' information here.

Use your notes to complete Section B. You will note that on some of the bullet questions it is indicated that we are not looking for the number of responses, just narrative. It is important to address these questions in the *narrative* if youth responded to them. On the Response Record, leave these questions blank, as well as questions or response bullets that youth did not address or mention.

We know that not all youth will respond to all the bullet questions and you may not get to all the bullet questions. If you can do your best to represent the number of responses that you do get in each category, it will help give the final report writer a sense of frequency of response across a broad number of groups.

The Narrative

This is the part where you express the voices of the youth. As you take notes, please do your best to capture youth's response as they give it. It is important to take good enough notes so that you can count the number of similar responses and so that you can use quotes in report where possible. Please write one to three paragraphs on each question, depending on how in-depth the question and/or responses were. Please indicate the number of types of responses and important quotes.

Summarize the overall mood or opinion—or if it is mixed, write about that. Any message that participants were particularly strong about would be important to include, even if it is not addressed in the questions. If they seemed unclear, that would be important information also. For example, if they seem unclear about what services would help them or what services exist, that might indicate a gap in our youth service system. Again, use quotes as much as you can.

On the next page is the format for the report.

Youth Target Group:
Site of Focus Group:
Date of Focus Group:

Name of Facilitator:
Name of Recorder:
Number of Participants:

A. Responses to Questions

1. How did you hear about the program you are in now?
2. How is your current program different from your previous school experience?
3. How long were you out of school before coming to this program?
4. Why did you leave school?
5. When you think about your future, what do you see yourself doing?
6. What kinds of services would help you achieve your goals?
7. What can we do to get more out-of-school youth to connect with education or employment programs?

B. Summary

Sample Focus Group Write-up

Youth Target Group: Out-of-School Youth, Connected to a Program

Site of Focus Group: Boston CareerLink

Date of Focus Group: June 2, 2005

Facilitator: Susan

Recorder: Abi

Number of Participants: 7

Summary

1. How did you hear about the program you are in?

List of students and programs

All of the students in the program were there because they did not pass the MCAS (many by only a few points on one section). Two of the participants had failed the English section of the MCAS, at least in part, because English was not their first language. Almost all had taken the MCAS multiple times without success.

Some participants learned of the program through job or resource fairs. Others learned about the program through referrals from school staff (counselor, teacher, etc). Participants overwhelmingly felt positive about the programs they were involved in, either because of the staff support they receive from the MCAS prep class teachers or the support they receive from the CareerLink case manager.

As an aside, the participants generally did not know what their “program” was, perhaps because they were in a number of linked programs (Career Center services, MCAS prep at the community colleges), perhaps because that is simply not how they think of the services they receive. As a result, some comments pertain to the instructional programs at the community colleges and some pertain to the career center services.

Quotes:

“This program is a lifeline to me. It’s so hard to get a job without a diploma.”

How does your program differ from your school experience?

Many of the participants’ comments focused on the teacher student relationship as the primary difference. Specifically, participants felt that teachers in their MCAS prep classes provided personal, tailored attention to each student as opposed to their school teachers who they perceived to give worksheets and sit in front of the class. In addition, one participant felt that he could take more chances in the prep course as a result of the supportive environment the teacher created – he felt he was more comfortable trying to answer a question even if he wasn’t sure of the answer. Another commented that he felt that the prep class teachers look at each student “as a person.”

An interesting theme that seemed to come through the answers was a feeling that the standard teacher-student relationship in BPS is adversarial. One participant said he felt like school teachers felt aggression toward the students – “you can see the stress in their faces when they walk in the room.” This same student commented, “Teachers are just there to give you work while they grade papers. Teachers just want to get their money. If teachers really taught well, we wouldn’t be here.”

Another student commented that he felt that the BPS curriculum moved more slowly than other Massachusetts school districts and did not cover all of the material tested on the MCAS.

A student described his experience walking into his MCAS prep classroom for the first time: “When I walked in, he shook my hand, introduced himself and said his goal was to get everyone in the class to love math. Then he looked at my score sheet and immediately said he noticed the areas I had trouble with. He said, ‘This is easy. We have 14 weeks to get you two points in these areas.’ I felt like he knew what he was doing. All I had to do was work on the things that I didn’t understand, not do things I already knew like in school.”

Other differences:

- Friends were a distraction at school and in previous prep classes
- One-on-one help
- Not all day
- Big classes in high school (smaller prep classes)

How long were you out of school before coming to this program?

All of the participants had completed the 12th grade BPS curriculum, but did not graduate because they did not pass the MCAS. One student noted that you do not receive the results of the test (if you took it in 12th grade) until the summer, after you have “graduated.” If you find out that you didn’t pass, then it is not only discouraging, but it is challenging to get connected with programs at that point. You are essentially stuck in limbo, without a safety net. Many students talked about how discouraging failing the test is and the idea that students are not being set up to succeed – “I found out that I didn’t pass right before the prom. Not passing messed up prom. I didn’t want to do anything fun.” Another participant made the link that if you don’t pass, you can’t get a job, and if you can’t get a job, then you get depressed and “get into things.” Most of the participants talked about how not passing the MCAS derailed their future plans (college, trades, etc.).

Many of the students expressed that they had a number of things going on in their lives at the time they were dealing with passing the MCAS including, having a child, having a job (almost everyone had held a job throughout high school), being homeless, dealing with street violence, and selling drugs, as well as all of the regular assignments required of seniors (independent study, papers, applications, SATs)

This questions elicited strong reactions to the concept of requiring the MCAS for graduation. A student told a story about a student who passed the MCAS in October of his senior year, did not attend class for the remainder of the year and was allowed to graduate. In comparison, the student who told the story passed many of his finals, but not the MCAS and was allowed to proceed. Many of the students wondered how it was possible to pass your final exams, but not the MCAS, which is what perhaps precipitated the feeling that BPS is not moving as quickly as the MCAS requires.

Quotes:

“Don’t you want us to succeed?”

“Someone told me that they give you the MCAS to test if your teacher is doing his job.

That’s not my problem.”

“There is no difference between someone who is uneducated and someone who doesn’t pass the MCAS – you end up in the same place, even if you’re a smart person.” (i.e., can’t get a job without a diploma)

“Programs like this (CareerLink) are great.”

When you think about your future what do you see yourself doing?

In contrast to other focus groups, every member of this group had a clear sense of what they wanted to do long-term and how to get there. Careers that were mentioned included:

- licensed plumber
- music engineering
- teacher
- nurse
- day care provider
- interior designer

One student in particular knew extensively about the plumbing business because of family connections. He had worked for the family business and knew that even though he was doing all the same work as an apprentice he was making half as much because he couldn’t get into the union without a diploma.

What kind of services would help you achieve your goals?

There was not much response to this question. One person talked about the value of family support in persisting through his MCAS challenges. Another said the best service would be a guarantee that you would pass, though everyone agreed that that was not realistic.

What can we do to get more out-of-school youth to connect with education or employment programs?

This question was mostly answered by two of the participants who both felt that it is critical to not only get information about programs in the public eye (through advertising, special interest features on the news and in the paper – the Herald or the Metro), but also take the extra step of selling these programs to the people who need them and give them

first-hand knowledge of the programs. In other words, it was important to show kids who need the services that they can succeed regardless of their backgrounds.

At this point, the discussion focused largely on more societal issues like racism, neighborhood violence, poverty, and the absence of positive role models in many low-income communities. Some important quotes:

- “Whoever made the MCAS wants people to be in the bad situation so that they have something to complain about on the news.”
- “Who’s really passing the tests? I’m not dumb. Most of the people in the [prep] classes are minorities. The people who are failing are people who are in schools where the curriculum is not as good.”
- “I refuse to be in this cycle. I don’t think the people at the top understand what’s going on. They need to walk down Braodway Street to see what my life is like without getting harassed by security guards. A lot of my friends are just trying to feed their families. There just need to be more programs like this to show people that there’s a way out.”
- “When I didn’t pass the MCAS, it aggravated the pain (from losing my brother). I just keep getting knocked down. The pain doesn’t go away. It’s distracting.”

On a side note, one participant mentioned that she used to live in New York, where they have a similar test, but she seemed to think that students were not having as difficult a time passing the test as in Massachusetts.

What motivates you to keep going? (This question was ad-libbed, by the facilitator.)

- “The hunger to be successful like the people you see in magazines and TV. I’ve been through it all. I’m game. It’s all about your goals.”
- “To be successful.”
- “If I don’t get my diploma, I can’t get a good job. I want to be in a job where I get respect.”
- Daughter motivates, family very supportive – you can do it
- Pursuit of higher learning, go to college, make something out of yourself.

Site: Boston CareerLink	Date: 6/2/05
Type of Group: Out of School, Connected	
Total Number of Participants: 7	
Facilitator: Susan Crandall	Recorder: Abi Karlin-Resnick
A. Participant Information Questionnaire Responses	Responses
	Number
Age	
16-18	
19-21	7
22-24	
Ethnicity	
African American	3
Asian	
Latino	2
Mixed	1
White	1
Other	
Gender	
Male	4
Female	3
Current Activity	
School	5
Working	4
Training	
Other	
Left high school before receiving diploma	
Yes	
No	7
Highest Grade or Credential Completed	
some college	
high school diploma	
12th grade, no diploma	7
GED	
11th	
10th	
9th	
less than 9th	
Neighborhood	
Allston-Brighton	1
Back Bay/Beacon Hill	
Charlestown	
Downtown	
Dorchester	3
East Boston	
Fenway/Kenmore	
Jamaica Plain	3
Hyde Park	
Mattapan	

Roslindale	
Roxbury	
South Boston	
South End	
West Roxbury	
Outside of Boston	
B. Questions for Discussion	Responses
	Number
1a. How did you hear about the program you are in now?	
School teacher or counselor	2
Other counselor (cbo, career center, YMCA, etc)	1
Newspaper, TV or flyers	
Friend	1
Parents or relatives	
Other	2
b. What about the program that made you decide to enroll?	
Small size	2
Program staff or teachers	3
A quick way to finish my education	
The other students	
Other	
c. What made it easy to get into the program?	
(use narrative only on this part of the question)	
d. What made it hard to get into the program?	
(use narrative only on this part of the question)	
2a. How is your current program different from your previous school experience?	
(use narrative only on this part of the question)	
b. What has made you stay?	
Attention from teachers or staff	1
Like the other students	
Feel like I am learning something/making progress	2
Want to finish my education	1
Other	
3a. How long were you out of school before starting this program?	
Less than 3 months	
Less than 6 months	1
6-12 months	4
1 year	1
2 years	1
More than 2 years	
b. What grade were you in when you left?	
(you have this information recorded in section A)	

c. What have you done since you left?	
School	7
Working	7
Training	1
Caring for family	1
Other	
B. Questions for Discussion	Responses
	Number
4. Why did you leave school?	
a. How did you leave?	
Signed out	
Met with counselor	None of these students
Told about other options	left school prior to
Just stopped coming	completing 12th grade
Expelled	
Other	
b. Why did you leave school?	
i. Personal reasons	
Family responsibilities	
Arrest, court, conviction	
Illness or injury	
Had to work	
Other	
ii. Something about the school	
Teachers	
Other students	
Too big, got lost	
Work too difficult	
Other	
c. Did you seek help or was help offered?	
Sought help	
Help was offered	
Neither sought help or was offered help	
5. When you think about your future, what do you see yourself doing?	
a. Do you have a career goal?	
Have a career goal	7
Don't have a career goal	
b. What led you to think about that?	
Work experience influenced career perspective	2
Parents' work experience influenced career perspective	

<i>c. Have you worked before? What kind? Has this helped you think about your future?</i>	
<i>d. What do family members or relatives do for a living?</i>	
<i>e. Are you influenced by or interested in jobs that they have?</i>	
(c-e: record numbers for these answers for <i>b</i> and in narrative)	
<i>f. Do you know what it will take to get to your career goal</i>	
Understand what it takes to get to desired career	7
Don't understand what it takes	
<i>g. What help or support do you have at this time?</i>	
(Use narrative only on this part of the question)	
B. Questions for Discussion	Responses
	Number
6. What additional services or support would help you achieve your goals?	
Education	
Work-readiness training	
Employment	
Job Training	
Help with personal development	
Help staying focused	
Other	
7a. What can we do to get more out-of-school youth connected with programs?	
More outreach	5
More programs	
type of program: work, training	
type of program: educational	
More counseling on options available	
Other	
<i>b. Why don't more youth who are out of school or work try to connect with education or work programs?</i>	
(Use narrative only on this part of the question)	

**Youth Focus Group
Participant Information Questionnaire (*Anonymous*)**

1. Age _____

2. Ethnicity: African American
 Asian
 Latino
 Mixed
 White
 Other

3. Gender: Male
 Female

4. Current activity: In school
(*You can answer more than one*) Working
 In a training program
 Other (please describe) _____

5. Did you leave high school before receiving a diploma? yes no

6. What was the highest grade or credential you completed?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> some college | <input type="checkbox"/> 11 th |
| <input type="checkbox"/> high school diploma | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 th |
| <input type="checkbox"/> GED | <input type="checkbox"/> 9 th |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 12 th no diploma | <input type="checkbox"/> less than 9 th |

7. What neighborhood do you live in?

- | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Allston-Brighton | <input type="checkbox"/> East Boston | <input type="checkbox"/> Roslindale |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Back Bay/Beacon Hill | <input type="checkbox"/> Fenway/Kenmore | <input type="checkbox"/> Roxbury |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Charlestown | <input type="checkbox"/> Jamaica Plan | <input type="checkbox"/> South Boston |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Downtown | <input type="checkbox"/> Hyde Park | <input type="checkbox"/> South End |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dorchester | <input type="checkbox"/> Mattapan | <input type="checkbox"/> West Roxbury |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outside of Boston | | |

8. Is there anything else you would like to tell us that you didn't get to during the discussion?

FOCUS GROUP ROSTER/DISBURSEMENT RECORD

Date of Group

Time

Location

THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS HAVE RECEIVED \$20.

Printed Name	Signature
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	
11.	
12.	
13.	
14.	