

District Summer Learning Network (DSLN) Youth Voice Focus Group



Introduction and Overview

Youth voice can play a critical role in summer learning design and continuous improvement. Focus groups offer one method for gathering youth input related to summer programs. Focus groups can provide insight into how summer learning programs advance whole child development and equity and provide additional data points to understand summer learning programs.

The main purpose of a focus group is to “draw upon respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods.” (Morgan & Kreuger 1993). Focus groups can complement surveys, interviews, observations, and other approaches to gathering participant and broader community feedback on summer learning program design and experiences. They are also a useful qualitative tool for program monitoring and /or assessment.

Focus Group Objectives and Design

Focus groups can occur before a summer program begins to highlight students’ priorities, during a program to understand students’ experiences, or after a program ends to hear from students about their summer experiences. *Before developing questions and identifying your participants, consider whether you want to use focus groups to inform program design and planning or provide data for program evaluation and reflection.*

Focus group objectives will vary depending on districts’ needs and priorities, and may include opportunities to learn about:

- Participants’ impressions of summer learning programs;
- What informs a decision to participate in a voluntary summer learning program;
- What they hope to learn and gain during the summer program;
- The extent to which they experience a summer learning site as positive, inclusive, and welcoming;
- The extent to which they and their interests and priorities are represented;
- Effective communications channels and summer learning messages for recruiting and engaging students and their parents/caregivers;
- Participants’ understanding of the purpose of summer learning (and how they know what that purpose is); and
- Recommendations for future summer learning programs.

Topics may be the same across different time periods (i.e., pre-, during, or post-summer programs), but the phrasing of the questions will change depending on how you want to use the data and when the discussion takes place.

Developing Your Questions

Below we provide sample questions that draw on focus group discussions led by the FHI 360 team, as well as recommendations from DSLN members who participated in our summer 2022 youth voice focus groups initiative. The questions are organized according to the following structure:

Introductory/Engagement Questions – Easy questions about the students or their summer learning programs to get them talking about the same experience or topic.

Exploration Questions – Questions that explore summer learning in more detail and elicit students’ feelings, opinions, wants, and needs about the topic. These questions use the “fist-to-five” response technique, which allows all participants to share their answers at once. This helps to normalize diversity of opinion and reduces the chances that one student in the focus group will discourage or sway other members of the group.

Exit Questions – These questions are to ensure everything has been covered and nothing is left unsaid. It is a good practice to offer students a way to contact the moderators if they remember anything they’d like to add after the session ends.

The questions below are organized according to this structure and are focused on summer planning. We recommend that you choose no more than 6-10 questions for your discussion, depending on the size of the group.

If you are organizing a focus group focused on reflection and evaluation you can revise your questions as needed (see table below). You can also see a sample list of program evaluation and reflection questions on pages 7-8.

Sample Planning Question	Parallel Sample Question for Program Evaluation and Reflection
<p>Relevance: Fist to five, “My summer learning program should be relevant to my life and what’s important to me.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator asks participants to expand on their answers. • Can you describe examples of learning / activities that are relevant to you and your priorities? • What are examples of learning that is less relevant? • What other topics, or types of learning (discussion, creative projects, etc.), feel most relevant to you? 	<p>Relevance: Fist to five, “This summer learning program was relevant to my life and what’s important to me.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator asks participants to expand on their answers. • Can you describe examples of learning / activities you engaged in this summer that felt relevant to you and your priorities? • Were there examples of learning experiences that were less relevant? • What other topics, or types of learning (discussion, creative projects, etc.), that feel most relevant to you do you wish had been included in the program?

Sample Questions

Note: where you see DISTRICT SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM, substitute the name of your program.

Introductory questions

- Please share your name, grade, summer learning site/program, and whether you’re participated in a summer learning program before (if applicable).
- Which of the following would make you most interested in participating in a summer learning program? Select all that apply:
 - Gain new skills
 - Strengthen academics

- Participate in fun activities (for instance, *LIST ENRICHMENT OFFERINGS*)
- Spend time with friends
- Meet new people
- Participate in work-study program (*if applicable*)
- Make my parent/guardian happy
- Other (eg avoid boredom at home)
- We're trying to understand what people already know about DISTRICT SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM. What have you heard about the program?
 - What questions do you have about the program?
- We'd like to know what people think about DISTRICT SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM. Please choose one to three words that best describe your assumptions about summer learning (*ex: fun, silly, challenging*)
 - Tell me about the words you chose.

Exploratory questions

The questions below use the “fist to five” method. This allows all participants to respond to questions in a low-stakes way. Facilitators can record fist-to-five data and ask follow-up questions to understand why participants responded the way they did.

Explain the Fist-to-five concept:

I'm going to share some statements and you're going to let me know how much you agree from 0-5. For instance – “I like ice cream.” Zero is not at all, one is a little, two is a little more, all the way up to five – it's my favorite.

To answer, you'll hold up your hand so everyone can see. So, for zero you'll hold up your fist (facilitator demonstrates), for a three you'll hold up three fingers (facilitator demonstrates), for a five you'll hold up all five fingers (facilitator demonstrates). We call this “Fist to Five.”

Can everyone try holding up five fingers so we can see them? (If conducting a virtual focus group, facilitator works with participants to make adjustments as needed). Great. Let's try this out.

General
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I want a summer program that feels exactly like a regular school year.” Hold up your fist if you want a program that's not at all like a regular school year, and then go up to five if you want a program that feels exactly like a regular school year. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Facilitator asks participants to expand on their answers</i> ○ What do you want to be different about your summer learning program? Why? ○ What do you want your summer learning program to keep from the school year? Why? ● “I want to meet and learn from other people and communities as part of my summer learning program.”
Academic Experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Summer learning programs should be exciting and interesting.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can you give me an example of a time when learning was exciting/interesting? ● What are examples of learning that is less exciting/interesting?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would make a summer learning program interesting and exciting for you? • “I want a summer learning program to help me next year at school [alt: in the future].” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would be helpful to you as you prepare for the future? • What do you think would be less helpful? • “I want to see hands-on activities at my program.”
<p>Enrichment Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I want to do fun (or interesting) things in PROGRAM NAME” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What fun (or interesting) things would you like to do? • What activities would be less fun (or interesting)?
<p>Climate and Culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “The adults (and older students, if applicable) who lead summer learning are a big part of whether or how I want to participate.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ You don’t have to name names, but – what kind of adults and older students are you looking for in a summer learning program? What should they be like? ○ What should adults and older students avoid doing to make sure you have a positive summer learning experience?” ○ “I want to feel cared for during my summer learning program.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If you agreed, what does that mean for you? ○ “I want to be myself at my summer program.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If you agreed, what does that mean for you? ○ “I want my program to help students learn how to work together and deal with disagreements when they come up.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How would you like your program to help you deal with conflict? ○ What would you like to avoid when it comes to dealing with conflict?
<p>Student Voice, Choice, and Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Choice is very important to me in my summer program.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you agreed, what kind of choices are important to you as you plan how you’re going to spend your summer? • “Leadership opportunities are very important to me in my summer program.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If you agreed, what kinds of leadership opportunities would you like to see at your program?

Other exploratory questions:

- We’re trying to figure out the best way to get information about (NAME OF DISTRICT SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM) to other students and families, so we’re going to ask you some questions about where and how you get your information.
 - First, can we make a list of different ways that your school sends out information? You can answer in the chat or just call out answers (e.g., emails, online portal, Remind/other app, take-home materials)
 - What are some of the WORST ways to get information to you?
 - What are some of the WORST ways to get information to your parents/caregivers?
 - What are some of the BEST ways to get information to you?
 - What are some the BEST ways to get information to your parents/caregivers?

- I'm going to show you a list of words and images that we are considering for our summer learning programs (*facilitator shares flyers, posters, or online content that has been designed for the district's summer program*).
 - Which words and images do you think would be the most effective for you? For your friends? Why?
 - Which words and images do you think would be the least effective for you? For your friends? Why?

Exit questions

- What do you recommend DISTRICT include in this year's summer learning program?
 - What do you DEFINITELY want to see in a summer program?
 - What do you DEFINITELY not want to see in a summer program?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Focus Group Coordination and Facilitation

After you have selected your questions you can use the customizable Youth Voice Focus Group Protocols (see separate document) to prepare your script. Below are some additional guidance and tips for scheduling your focus group discussion.

Focus group composition and logistics:

- A group of **six to ten** students is a good size. The group needs to be large enough to generate rich discussion but not so large that some participants are left out.
- 45 – 60 mins is a recommended amount of time. A smaller group may not need as much time as a larger group.
- Ideally, include a diverse group of students in the focus group to provide a variety of perspectives. You may also want to identify students who can speak to both positive and negative impressions of summer programs, as well as students who have participated in different programming strands.
- Avoid power dynamics within a group, i.e., a student may not speak freely in a group with their principal or teacher. Similarly, try to avoid selecting students from the same friendship group, since peer dynamics can skew responses even when actual experiences are different.
- You may choose to conduct a virtual focus group or an in-person focus group. Virtual focus groups allow you to work with students from multiple schools/sites more easily, but some participants may be more comfortable speaking in person with a facilitator. If you choose to conduct a focus group you may decide to use communications platform features (e.g., anonymous polls, chat responses to “fist to five” and follow-up questions) to gather participant input.
- 8 – 12 questions are recommended. Note, the larger the group, the longer it will take to get detailed responses.

Conducting the focus group:

- It is recommended to have a moderator and note-taker during each session. Having a note-taker frees up the moderator to focus on asking questions and listening. Recording is recommended, even for in-person sessions. This will ensure quotes from participants are verbatim. However,

you should follow your districts' guidelines for recording students' information – for instance, you may wish for audio-only recordings.

- Use the questions as guide, not a script. The focus group conversation should be a discussion and not oral survey responses.
- The moderator must remain neutral. Encouraging conversation is good but refrain from agreeing or disagreeing with student comments.
- The moderator will need to ensure some students do not dominate the conversation and that all students are able to respond throughout the session. However, we recommend that moderators do not force students to answer questions, and that students be allowed to leave the focus group if they choose to do so.
- The moderator may want to repeat students' statements back to them (e.g., "So what I heard you say was...") to ensure they understood correctly.

Compiling, Analyzing, and Sharing Findings

As you design your focus group, consider how you will approach the information that participants share. Developing a plan to understand themes that emerge and identify outstanding questions can help you prepare to reflect on and identify action items in response to participant feedback.

We recommend that staff leading youth focus groups also discuss how to share back to participants what you learned from the focus group(s), and how the summer learning team plans to act on those findings, if applicable. Letting students know that their voices were heard can help strengthen their sense of agency and engagement and improve summer learning buy-in. Be sure that any sharing you do preserves participants' anonymity (e.g., don't mention specific program sites, or grade levels).

- Basic focus group analysis:
 - Compile transcripts (virtual platforms will automatically transcribe recordings) of each group and separate out each question across all the groups; i.e., in Excel, use a spreadsheet for each question and list responses.
 - Identify themes or categories for each question. Use the spreadsheet to note each time a participant responds in a theme or category.
 - Consider documenting your findings by category or theme and noting key questions or insights that arise. Make sure that any identifying information from participants (e.g., grade level, home school) is removed from the report.
- Reporting and reflection:
 - To be helpful, focus group findings should be disseminated and acted on, as appropriate. Develop a plan to share your findings with members of the summer learning team to help inform summer planning or assessment.
 - Consider whether and how you want to share high-level findings and planning team responses with participants and more broadly. For instance, your summer learning communications might emphasize program changes that respond to students' priorities.

Sources consulted

- [Conversations with Kids: Walking the Road to Reinvention](#), Transcend (2021)

- [Sample Youth Focus Group Protocol](#), Youth Development Executives of King County
- [Student Perception Survey Toolkit](#), Colorado Education Initiative (2020)
- [Youth Perspectives on Designing Equitable Out-of-School-Time Programs](#), Wallace Foundation (2022)
- [Youth Voice and Choice Resources](#), Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network

Sample Reflection and Evaluation Questions

Introductory Questions

- Please share your name, grade, and summer learning site/program.
- Why did you choose to participate in this summer program? Choose all that apply.
 - Gain new skills
 - Strengthen academic
 - Credit recovery/school requirement
 - Participate in fun activities (for instance, LIST ENRICHMENT OFFERINGS)
 - Spend time with friends
 - Meet new people
 - Participate in work-study program (*if applicable*)
 - My parent/guardian signed me up
 - Other
- We'd like to know about the environment at your summer program. Please choose one to three words that best describe the vibe at your program (*ex: fun, silly, challenging*)
 - Tell me about the words you chose.

Exploratory Questions

General
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This program feels like a regular school year.” Hold up your fist if it feels like not at all, and then go up to five if it feels exactly like a regular school year. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Facilitator asks participants to expand on their answers</i> • “This program was exactly what I expected.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What did you think it was going to be like? ○ What was surprising about the program? • “I get to meet and learn from other people and communities as part of my program.” • “My friends who aren’t here would like this program.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Why do you think they would like it? ○ Why do you think they wouldn’t like it? • “I would recommend this program to my friends.” • “I want to come back next year.” • “I like the daily schedule at my summer program.”
Academic Experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I am excited about what I’m learning.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about a part of your summer where you learned a lot. • “My time in this summer learning program will help me next year at school [alt: in the future].”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will it help you? • Why do you think it won't be helpful? • "I liked the hands-on activities at my program and felt they helped me to learn."
Enrichment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We do fun (or interesting) things in PROGRAM NAME" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What fun (or interesting) things have you done? What do you like the best? • What parts are less fun (or interesting)?
Climate and Culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "I feel cared for during my summer learning program." ○ "I can be myself at my summer program." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If you agreed, what does that mean for you? ○ If you disagreed, what is preventing you from being yourself? ○ "There is one adult in the building who knows you and who know well, and who you could go to for help if you needed it." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can you give specific examples of how people have shown they care? ○ Tell us about moments when it's felt like people aren't so caring (or as caring as you wish they were / needed them to be). ○ How does this compare to your home-school experience? ○ "PROGRAM NAME helps students learn how to work together and deal with disagreements when they come up." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How does your program help students deal with conflict? ○ What doesn't work as well when it comes to conflict between students.
Student Voice, Choice, and Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I get to choose what I do in my summer program." • Students can be leaders at PROGRAM NAME." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can you give us some examples of how students are serving as leaders? ○ What other leadership opportunities would you like to see at your program?
Family Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My parents/caregivers are happy that I am in this program. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What do they like about the program? ○ What would they change? • How did you hear about the summer learning program? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If you were in charge of letting other students know about the program and encouraging them to sign up, what would you tell them? How would you get that message to them?

Exit Questions

- What do you recommend DISTRICT include in this year's summer learning program?
 - What do you DEFINITELY want to see in a summer program?
 - What do you DEFINITELY not want to see in a summer program?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us?