

Focus: What do we want to understand?



Picture a staff meeting about a spring survey: engagement dropped from 3.45 to 3.32. People quickly jump to scrutinizing the survey (maybe they didn't understand the question?), the numbers (what do they mean by a "3"?), or quick conclusions ("it's because of our new math curriculum"). Empathy interviews are a way to find out more than a quick survey can. These small conversations are where students, staff, or families describe what's going on in their own words.



Connect

Write down one number or pattern your school keeps an eye on: a survey result, attendance, missing work, who signs up for AP, who comes to family night. What do you want to know more about?

Build

What we've noticed

What you've been noticing, wondering about, or observing on this topic.

Why it matters

Why does this data matter? What could it inform or change?

What we think is going on

Based on the data we have, why do we think this is happening?

Whose experiences we need to learn more about

Who's most affected? Who do we rarely hear from?

What we want to understand

Our focus, written as one open question. See the example on the next page.

Revise

Read your notes above. Consider your focus so far:

- Does it already contain a presumed answer? "Why don't students use tutoring?" assumes they need tutoring.
- Do students know that this is a focus of your school or organization? As in, are they involved in these conversations?
- Would a student see this as a problem? As in, are they perceiving it as an issue, or is it an issue we're placing on them?
- Is our focus a systemic one or an individual one?

Who should be involved

In most school surveys, students have their data collected and adults decide what it means. Empathy interviews can work differently: students can take part at every stage.

Role	What it looks like
Sharing their experiences	Taking part in the conversations, in small groups with classmates.
Shaping the questions	Reviewing and rewriting the question set, and adding what adults didn't think to ask.
Hosting	Leading conversations. Students often tell a classmate what they'd never tell an adult.
Making sense of it	Reading the data and sorting it into themes, analyzing the report, and pushing back on the adults' reading.
Deciding what's next	Choosing what to try, presenting to staff or the board, and checking whether it worked.

You don't need all five the first time, but aim for more than the first row to start.

Whose experiences are missing?

If we only invite students who sign up (or who are on student council, or nominated by educators), we'll miss important perspectives:

- Students who are absent a lot, and may be absent on interview day
- Students who work, care for siblings, or ride the late bus
- Multilingual students, if every conversation happens in English
- Students in alternative or self-contained programs
- Students who've been suspended or are on a shortened schedule
- Students who don't think their opinion counts

And adults: paraprofessionals, bus drivers, cafeteria and office staff, and families who can't make evening events.

Example

What we've noticed	About a third of our ninth graders stop going to clubs and activities by November.
What we think is going on	The jump in workload from eighth grade leaves them no time.
What we want to understand	When do ninth graders feel like they belong at school, and when does that change?
Why it matters	Counselors are redesigning ninth-grade orientation and advisory for next fall.
Whose experiences we need	Ninth graders who left, stayed, or never joined; late-bus riders; new students.
Who will help us ask	Six tenth graders, all ninth graders last year, who'll review the questions and host conversations.

