TOOLKIT: STUDENT EMPATHY INTERVIEW 9TH GRADE STUDENT SUCCESS

PURPOSE

As we plan for improvement, we cannot fully understand the problem unless we can empathize with those experiencing the challenge(s). As adults, we often make assumptions without pausing to ask our experts—students—what their experience has been, what has worked and what has not worked to support their learning. The purpose of Empathy Interviews is to elicit stories and to uncover hidden needs. Along with the quantitative 9th Grade on Track data, talking to students (and families) is a critical means of understanding how best to set the conditions for every 9th grader in your building to be on track for high school graduation (and beyond). Empathy interviews also build community and help foster a culture of inquiry.

HOW TO LEAD AN EMPATHY INTERVIEW

Interviewers should:

▶ Have a conversation for 10-20 minutes per student.

▶ Ensure that students feel safe sharing their perspective. Let students know that there will not be repercussions for information shared.

▶ Encourage stories. Focus on asking **open-ended** questions that elicit a story. Ask Why.

▶ **Don't be afraid of silence! Don't suggest answers to your questions!!**

▷ **TIP:** To help curb this inclination for both interviewee and interviewer to wait for the interviewer to cue, the interviewee might build in expectation to the context, "I'm going to ask for a story, and there will be some time I'll sit here in silence while you think of one."

▶ Take low inference notes and capture specific words and phrases used as much as possible—even if it means you don't get full sentences or all sentences recorded.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS SHOULD AIM TO CLARIFY AND EXPAND. ASK:

▶ Why?
▶ Can you tell me more about that?

▶ Walk me through that.
▶ How did it feel?

BE WARY OF ASKING TOO NARROW OF A QUESTION.

Exactly what Empathy Interview question(s) must be asked will depend on what information you're trying to obtain. That said, be cautious about asking too narrow of a question. For example, consider: "Tell me about what barriers to success you have experienced during your transition to high school." Contrast this with "Tell me about your experience transitioning to high school", paired with follow up questions to clarify and expand. Barriers within the response can be elevated. But if you ask only about barriers, you may miss a lot of other rich information about that person's experience as a whole.

Adapted from NWRESD 9th Grade Success Materials 2017-18

EMPATHY INTERVIEW
PRACTICE

▶ Tell me about a time when you started or tried something new.

▶ What was hard about it?
  ▷ **Why?**
  ▷ **Tell me more.**
  ▷ **How did it feel?**

▶ What was easy about it?
  ▷ **Why?**
  ▷ **Tell me more.**
  ▷ **How did it feel**

**What are some quotes and defining words
your interviewee said?**

Adapted from Community Design Partners 2019

EMPATHY INTERVIEW PLANNING TOOL

FROM YOUR DATA:

Who do you need to talk to?

- ▶ What data point(s) are you acting on?

- ▶ What Problems(s) of Practice?

- ▶ What group(s) does your data suggest you have much more that you "Need to Know"?

- ▶ Who is "in the margins" of a specific group(s) that you must understand and design intervention for?

  - ▷ In designing for the margins, you capture everyone.

  - ▷ Don't design away the successes.

What do you "Need to Know"?

- ▶ What problem(s) needs to be deeply understood?

- ▶ What stories do you need to collect in order to see the systems not allowing all students to stay on track?

- ▶ What open-ended questions will facilitate that learning?

How will you conduct your Empathy Interviews?

- ▶ What adults are involved?

- ▶ Who will identify the exact students and how? By when?

- ▶ Who will interview students? How many? By when?

- ▶ What is the deliverable for interviewers? Set clear, consistent expectations.

- ▶ By when will you analyze the data?

- ▶ How will you use the data for improvement?

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