

# Family Engagement Teams

## why FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

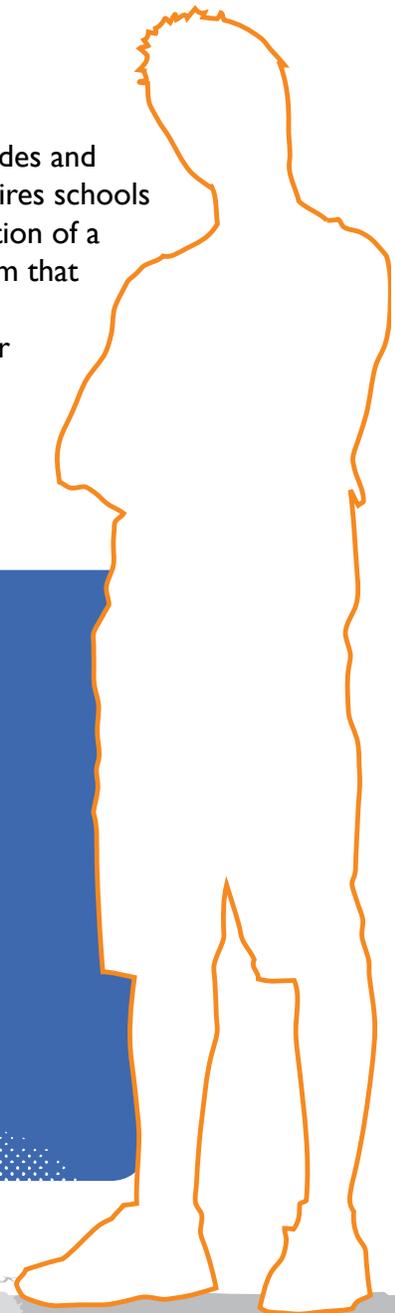
Research shows that when schools and families work together, students have higher grades and test scores, stay in school longer and have higher graduation rates. Next Steps NH requires schools to facilitate family engagement. One effective way to engage parents is through the creation of a Family Engagement Team. Most parents will welcome participating in an engagement team that ultimately leads to better preparation for life after high school for their children. When recruiting parents, emphasize that by participating they are contributing to a much larger perspective that can make a difference for students and families in the postsecondary process at the high school.

## in THIS GUIDE

When educators, families, students, community members, and organizations work together, postsecondary outcomes improve for students with disabilities.

This easy to follow guide contains information to help high school administrators, staff and parents to develop a Family Engagement Team using the focus group strategy. It provides information about:

- ✓ The benefits of starting with a focus group
- ✓ Specific focus group strategies
- ✓ How to choose parents to participate
- ✓ Reporting out the data
- ✓ Sample questions, and follow-up questions
- ✓ Outreach scripts and parent letters
- ✓ Debriefing after meetings



## why FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TEAMS?

Family Engagement Teams help to build trusting relationships between families, school staff, and district staff. At the high school level teams are made up of administrators, staff and family members working side-by-side to identify and implement ways to improve positive post-secondary outcomes for students. Teams often start with outreach from school administration around a targeted focus or specific topic.

Teams typically meet several times a year to share ideas, receive feedback and keep the lines of communication open. Meetings are usually facilitated by a school administrator with an agenda so that participants know the purpose, action steps and outcomes of the meeting.

Developing an effective team is not always easy, it requires commitment and time. Effective teams are made up of members who:

- view each partner as making equally valuable contributions, while respecting different contributions.
- provide information to the school community.
- develop informational materials, programs and opportunities for learning for both parents and staff.
- address barriers to involvement in schools by families, and actively help previously uninvolved families to become involved.
- give families appropriate opportunities to contribute to school decision-making and governance.

The positive results can be significant. Schools that engage families in their children's learning, transition planning, and school-wide initiative planning are tapping into a rich source of information and expertise. Learning the school systems and priorities, as well as the parent view, helps the team build the capacity and confidence of both staff and parents.

## What Family Engagement Team Members are Saying:

*Initially, I wasn't so sure about participating on a team made up of school professionals. I didn't understand my role. But as the teachers, administrators and other parents encouraged me to share my perceptions and ideas I realized my voice is important. It also helped me to understand some of the challenges that schools face. I was able to work for changes to the system. Change doesn't happen in a vacuum, it takes teamwork.*

—Parent Team Member

*It's not easy to admit, I was unsure about inviting parents to our meetings to discuss family engagement in high school. Honestly, some parents appeared angry or unsatisfied. As we started to know and trust each other, I learned how valuable it is to work together. Working closely with a small group of parents has had a positive impact on my relationships with a number of other parents. It's all of us, working together and valuing each other's input.*

—Special Ed. Case Manager

*We have actually saved a lot of time and effort from having more meetings! Now we get real-time feedback about how we're doing. We look for solutions and get parent input before we start to implement our own ideas. It's only been a short while, and we have a ways to go, however our high school is well on its way to including parents in different school teams and initiatives. We're also dedicating professional development time to understand the value of, and ways to, encourage parent engagement.*

—School Administrator

# GETTING STARTED

Family Engagement Teams often start as a focus group. A Focus Group provides an initial opportunity for parents to develop a comfort level while providing open and honest feedback about school practices.

Family Focus Groups are a way to include parents in a review or assessment of school practices. They may be conducted as a follow-up to a survey or as a sole means of soliciting parent input. Groups usually involve six to twelve participants.

Within this small group environment it's possible to obtain a great deal of information in a short period of time. Proper planning is required to conduct a productive focus group with parents.

After the initial feedback is given to the school's Family Engagement Team, school personnel start meeting with the group regularly and work together to set priorities and provide real time feedback on initiatives.

# Benefits of Starting with a FAMILY FOCUS GROUP

- \* Statements of one parent often initiate a chain reaction of additional comments
- \* A small group setting provides comfort and encourages candid input from participants
- \* Encourages a dynamic exchange of opinions, personal reactions and experiences of members
- \* Provides a depth of feedback that can't be achieved in surveys or 1:1 conversations
- \* Group discussion generates excitement about a specific topic
- \* Real-time feedback and input can be used in program and/or policy planning, development and evaluation

## Choosing parents for FAMILY FOCUS GROUP and ENGAGEMENT TEAMS

Include parents of:

Students with IEPs

Students at Risk

Students placed out-of-district

Traditional Students

Graduated Students

Use multiple outreach methods: personal phone calls, mail, email, word-of-mouth, existing parent groups

Focus Groups that are facilitated by a third party with no vested interest or bias provide the opportunity for participants to speak openly and honestly.

Having two facilitators for a focus group has the advantage of having one conduct the discussion while the other takes notes and acts as a backup.

# START WITH A FOCUS GROUP

## Consider the following tips:

1. Schedule sessions that are about two hours long at a time when parents are available. Avoid times near holidays or school vacations. Also avoid scheduling a group meeting when there is a major school event (eg. concert, play, awards, sports games).
2. In advance of the session, develop questions to keep the group focused (see samples on p. 6 & 7).
3. Hold sessions in a space that offers few distractions. A meeting room or library is ideal. Arrange chairs in circle, with or without tables.
4. Recruit parents whose students have had a range of experiences in high school with a variety of outcomes.
5. Develop ground rules or norms as a group (and post at each meeting).
6. Provide refreshments, particularly if parents are coming from work to participate.
7. Provide nametags to facilitate communication.
8. Create an agenda. Include a welcome, review of the agenda and ground rules, meeting goals or purpose, introductions, questions and answers, and wrap-up.
9. Determine how you will document the session. If a co-facilitator is not available, consider audio recording. Remember, you need permission from the participants if you audio record.
10. Always thank parents for their time and commitment. Consider offering a gift card or stipend.

## Family Engagement Groups Reporting the DATA

- \* A focus group report will consist of summaries of key points made in response to each question.
- \* The feedback from your focus groups should be collated, summarized and presented to the school Family Engagement Team in a way that makes decision-making reasonably straightforward.
- \* Keep the report as objective as possible, and try to capture the mood or response of the whole group. If divergent views were expressed, these should be reflected in the report.
- \* Avoid using specific quotes from participants if it would compromise confidentiality.

# Strategies for SUCCESS

## BEFORE:

- \* Develop your agenda and questions
- \* Give yourself plenty of time to set up
- \* Have someone greet parents at the door or post signs to direct parents to the right room
- \* Set out a sign-in sheet, name tags, and pens
- \* Set out refreshments on another table
- \* Smile and welcome people

## DURING:

- \* Begin on time or within 5 minutes
- \* Introduce yourself to the group
- \* Go over housekeeping issues (bathrooms/breaks)
- \* Explain the purpose of the meeting and how the information will be used
- \* Ask people to briefly introduce themselves
- \* Review the agenda
- \* Develop and post group norms
- \* Discuss using the Parking Lot (see sidebar)
- \* Avoid acronyms and jargon
- \* Encourage questions at any time
- \* Facilitate the discussion
- \* Post responses on flipchart paper
- \* Encourage participation from each person
- \* Do not force participation
- \* Keep a positive attitude and keep the group focused
- \* Balance the needs of the group
- \* End a few minutes early for wrap-up and evaluations
- \* Thank the group for coming
- \* Let people know what the next steps are

## IMMEDIATELY AFTER:

- \* While the conversation is fresh in your mind, record any additional thoughts

## Examples of spontaneous FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- 1) Please say more about that.
- 2) Can you give me more details?
- 3) Anybody else?
- 4) What caused you to...
- 5) What is it about...
- 6) What is your experience with...
- 7) What are your thoughts on...
- 8) How did you...?
- 9) How did/can we...
- 10) What features of X do you particularly like/dislike?

## PARKING LOT

It's common for participants to develop ideas or pose questions that are valuable and significant, but not related to the ultimate goal for the meeting.

These ideas and questions can run the risk of carrying the entire meeting into a different direction. To avoid this pitfall, hang a flip chart paper with the title *Parking Lot* on it. If a question or idea that side tracks the conversation comes up, "park it" on the side for now – and return to it at an appropriate time.

# Family Focus Group Questions Using THE NEXT STEPS NH FRAMEWORK

## 1. Schools welcome and respect all families; valuing individual families' diversity (cultural, socio-economic, etc.) thereby supporting families to be active participants in the transition process.

- \* What types of transition-related activities take into account parent/family education and socio-economic status?
- \* What types of transition-related activities do you think might involve more parents?
- \* What resources might be needed to achieve involving more parents in the transition process?

## 2. Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way communication throughout the transition process.

- \* How does the school communicate information to parents about preparing for life after high school?
- \* What are some ways your school solicits or invites feedback about transition?
- \* What have been some of the most effective ways of communicating life after high school materials and information?
- \* What might be some other ways or ideas for parents and schools to effectively communicate about the high school transition process?

## 3. School staff support student success by actively engaging families in transition-related decision making around:

### Transition Assessment Services

### Evaluating Services

### Evaluating Programs

- \* How does your school/district engage families in assisting students in successfully planning for life after high school?
- \* What have been some of the most effective methods of engaging families in assisting students in successfully planning for life after high school?
- \* What are some other ways of engaging families in their child's transition process?

## USING THE FRAMEWORK AS A GUIDE

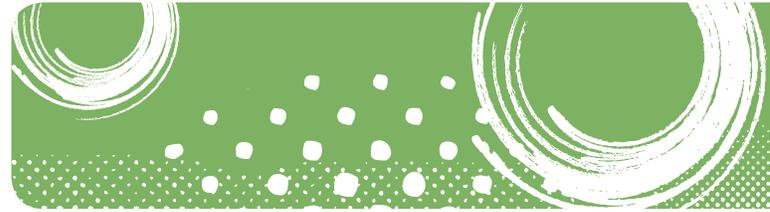
Read and explain each of the six components from the Family Engagement section of the Framework. Use focused, supporting questions to encourage the discussion and parent participation.

## NEXT STEPS NH

is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs at the US Department of Education with the goal of increasing the number of students with disabilities and/or at risk of dropping out of school that are college and career ready in NH through the implementation of evidenced based transition practices. Family engagement is one of the key components of the program framework.

#### **4. Families understand special education law and requirements to support their child in the transition process.**

- \* Does your school provide a variety of meaningful trainings, workshops or events around transition-related special education laws?
- \* What transition-related special education trainings or workshops are you aware of that have been offered?
- \* In what ways other than workshops does the school promote understanding of the transition-related IEP components and related special education laws?
- \* How does the school help you to understand transition-related special education laws and regulations?



#### **5. School staff provides a connection between families and community resources that support them and their child in the transition process.**

- \* What types of resources has the school connected you with to prepare for life after high school for your child?
- \* What type of community resources are you aware of that can help you and your child in preparing for life after high school?
- \* What types of community resources have been the most useful?
- \* What type of community resources would you like to be connected with?

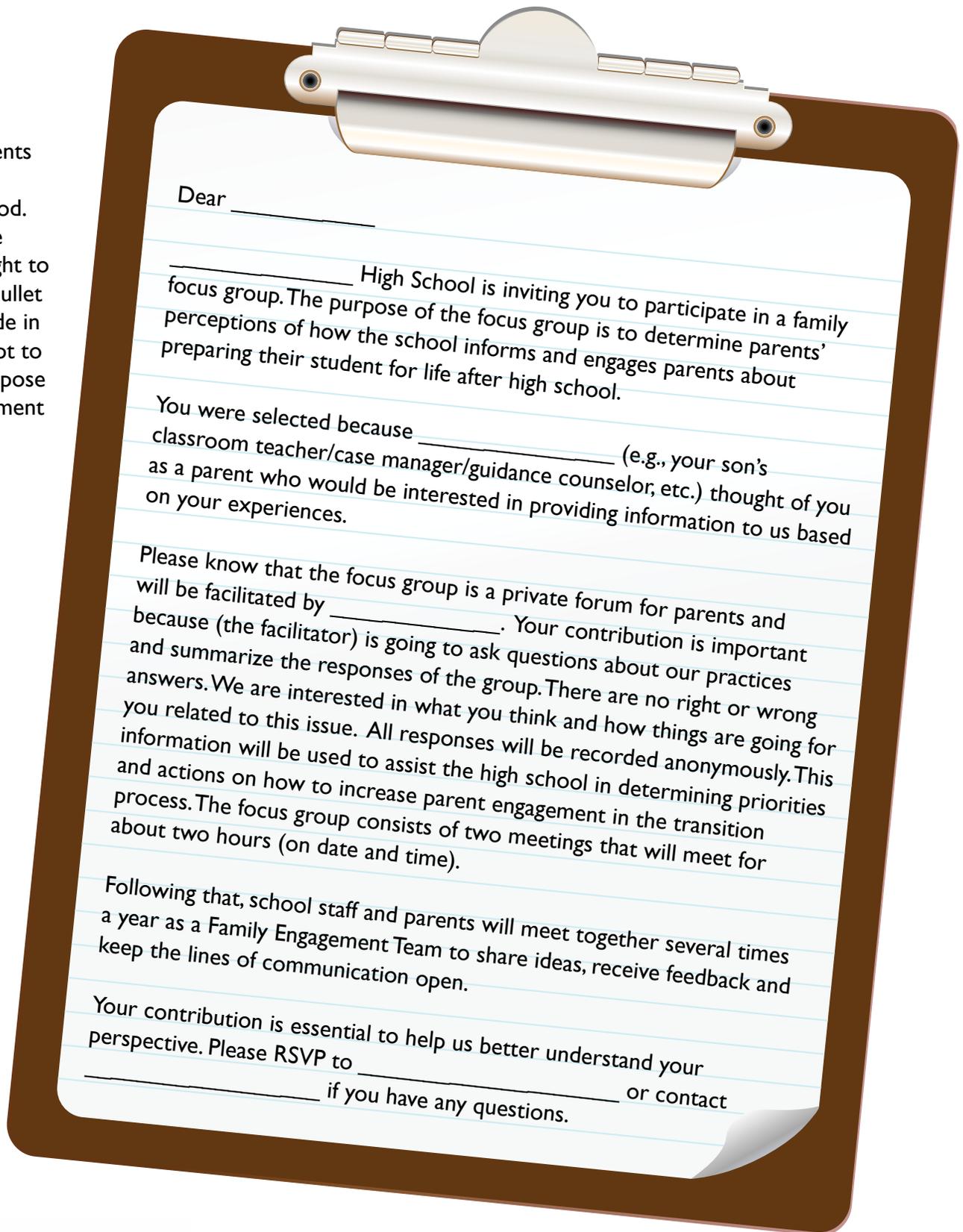


#### **6. The school provides and engages families in multiple transition-related training opportunities in a variety of formats.**

- \* What training opportunities for planning for life after high school are you aware of that the school has offered?
- \* What formats might be most helpful to you?
- \* What transition-related family/parent activities has the school provided?
- \* Are there transition-related topics or workshops that would be helpful to you?

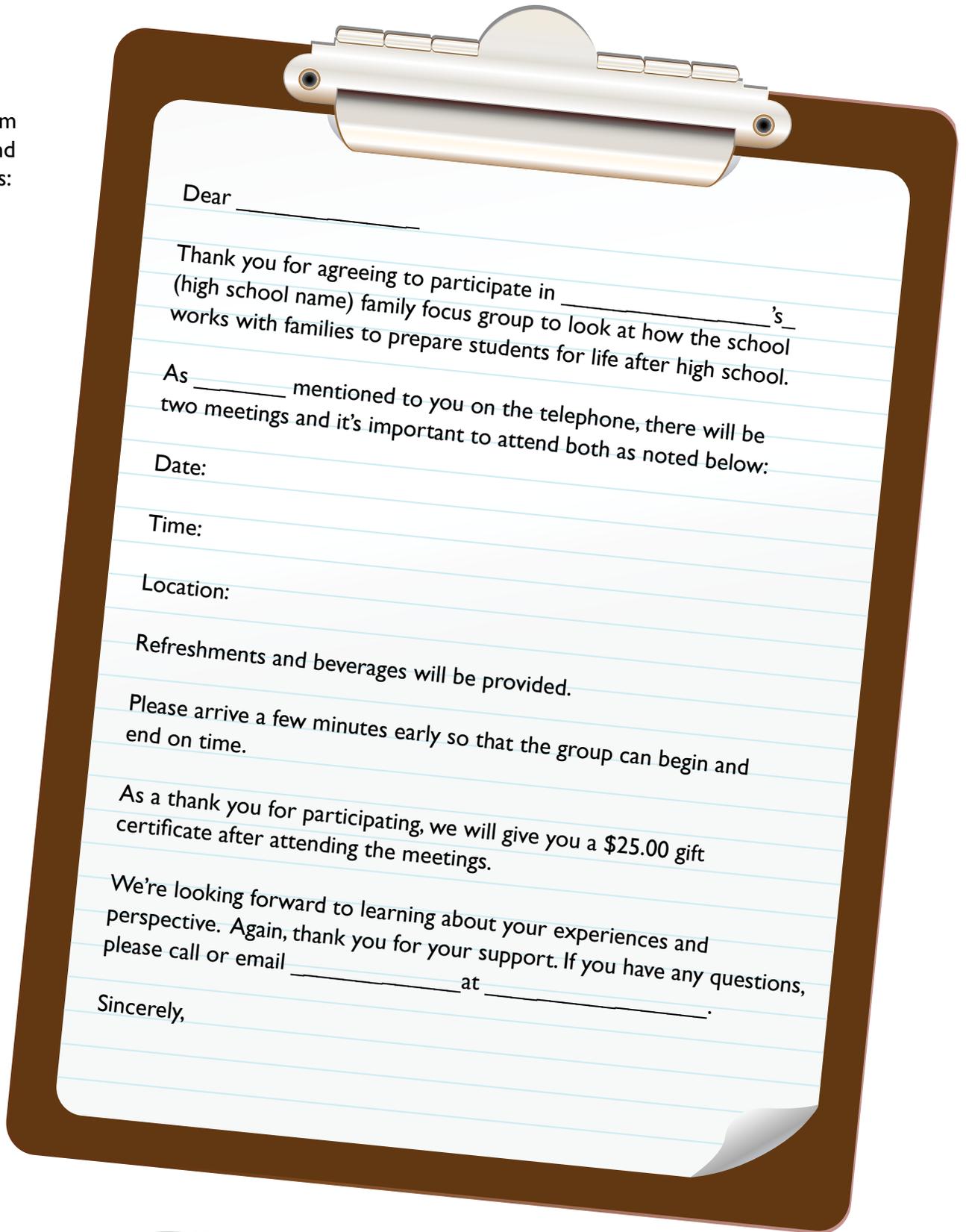
# INVITING Parents

Personally identifying and contacting parents is an effective outreach method. Use the sample letter at the right to identify a few bullet points to include in a letter or script to explain the purpose of and commitment to the group.



# PREPARING Parents

Use a similar letter to confirm participation and prepare parents:



Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to participate in \_\_\_\_\_'s  
(high school name) family focus group to look at how the school  
works with families to prepare students for life after high school.

As \_\_\_\_\_ mentioned to you on the telephone, there will be  
two meetings and it's important to attend both as noted below:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Refreshments and beverages will be provided.

Please arrive a few minutes early so that the group can begin and  
end on time.

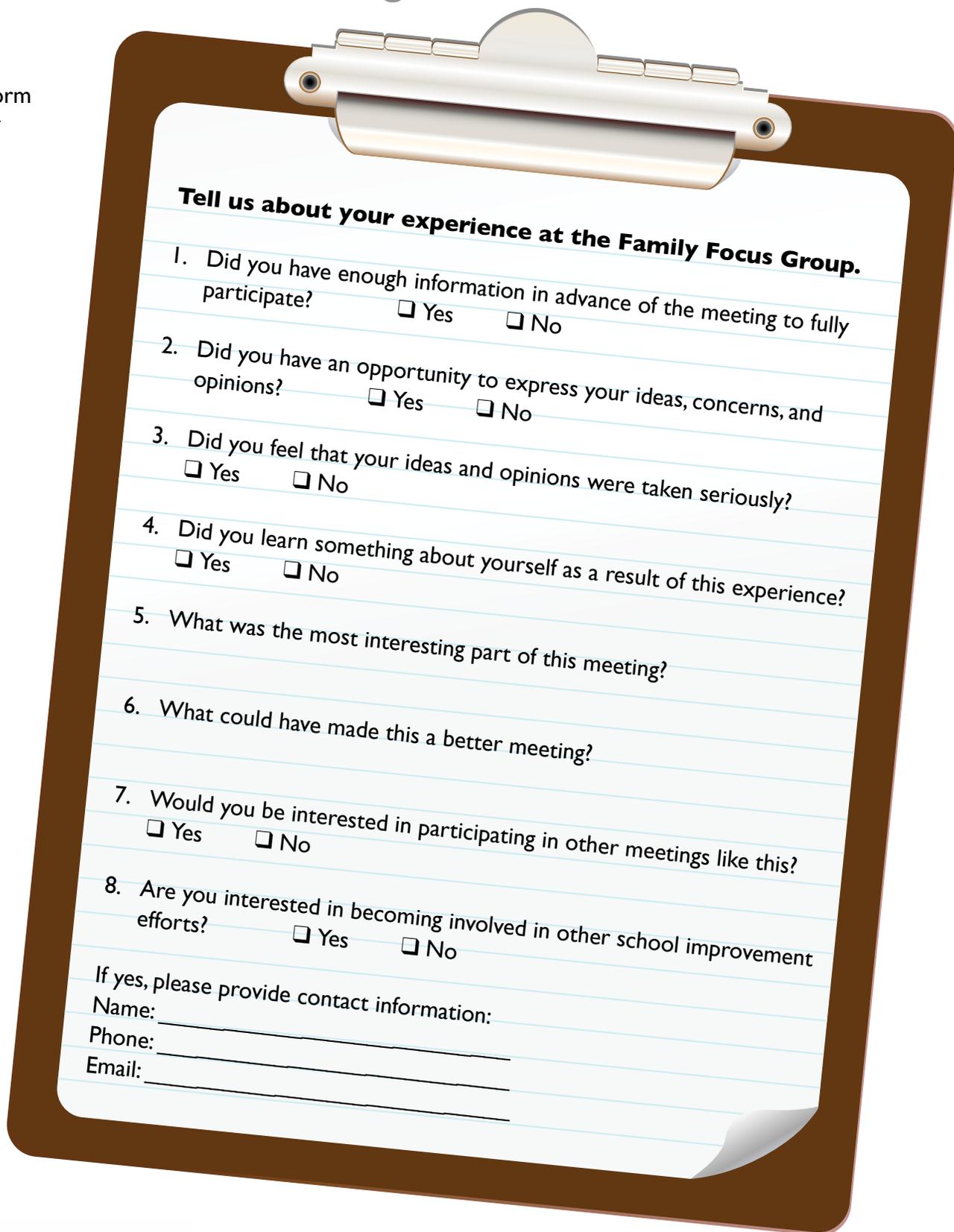
As a thank you for participating, we will give you a \$25.00 gift  
certificate after attending the meetings.

We're looking forward to learning about your experiences and  
perspective. Again, thank you for your support. If you have any questions,  
please call or email \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

# DEBRIEFING the Meeting

Use a similar form to debrief your group meeting:



**Tell us about your experience at the Family Focus Group.**

1. Did you have enough information in advance of the meeting to fully participate?  Yes  No
2. Did you have an opportunity to express your ideas, concerns, and opinions?  Yes  No
3. Did you feel that your ideas and opinions were taken seriously?  Yes  No
4. Did you learn something about yourself as a result of this experience?  Yes  No
5. What was the most interesting part of this meeting?
6. What could have made this a better meeting?
7. Would you be interested in participating in other meetings like this?  Yes  No
8. Are you interested in becoming involved in other school improvement efforts?  Yes  No

If yes, please provide contact information:  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

### *Engaging Families at the Secondary Level – What Schools Can Do to Support Family Involvement*

This strategy brief, created by the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, includes ideas to consider when engaging families at the secondary level. It also includes examples of specific strategies that counselors, teachers and parents can use to increase involvement at the secondary level.

<http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/rb/rb3-Secondary.pdf>

### *A Practitioner’s Guide to Involving Families in Secondary Transition*

This guide provides practitioners working with young adults with disabilities practical strategies for building expanded partnerships with parents during the transition years. It relies on three beliefs: parents need to be fully informed partners; practitioners need to empower parents to become partners; and parents can become accountable for actions upon and within the system.

<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED479816>

### *Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students’ Education*

This research brief, created by the Harvard Family Research Project, reviews the latest research on how family involvement impacts middle and high school students and what types of family involvement are effective.

<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/publications-series/family-involvement-makes-a-difference/family-involvement-in-middle-and-high-school-students-education>

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