

## Principal Focus Group

### Moderator's Guide

**INTRODUCTION:** Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm the moderator for today's 2-hour group discussion. \_\_\_\_\_ will be taking notes. Our purpose today is twofold:

1. Get your insights and understanding about the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as effected your school and this school district,
2. Learn how your schools deal with issues surrounding common behavioral problems.

This discussion is one of a series being held in 20 school districts around the country.

This is a project being conducted for the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education to learn how states and school districts are implementing the provisions of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. We work for Abt Associates (Westat), a research company based in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Rockville, Maryland) and have been hired to conduct this study.

Feel free to make any negative or positive comments about any of the things we will be discussing today. This is a free flowing discussion and there are no right or wrong answers.

Before we get started, here are some ground rules and points of information:

- DISCLOSURES:**
1. **CONFIDENTIALITY.** Everything that you say here will be kept strictly confidential. Nothing said in this group will ever be associated with any individual by name. We would also ask that you similarly maintain the confidentiality of what is said in the group.
  2. **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION.** Your participation in this group is entirely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. You do not have to any questions that you do not wish to answer. You may withdraw from the group at anytime with no consequences. The consent forms provide more detailed information regarding confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. If you haven't already done so, please sign the consent form and pass it to \_\_\_\_\_.
  3. **AUDIO-TAPING.** This session is being taped so that we can write an accurate report—not of who said what. If there are any objections we will not tape the session.

4. THANKS. Thank you for arranging your schedule today to be here for this session. We really appreciate you giving us your time, opinions and courage.

**GROUND RULES:**

1. Please talk one at a time in a voice as loud as mine.
2. Avoid side conversations with your neighbors.
3. We need to hear from everyone in the course of the discussion, but you don't have to answer every question.
4. Feel free to respond directly to someone who has made a point. You don't have to address your comments to me to get them on the table.
5. Say what is true for you and your school and have the courage of your conviction. Don't let the group sway you and don't "sell out" to group opinion.

**SELF-INTROS:**

Please introduce yourself to the group and tell us:

- Your name and school
- How long you have been principal of this school
- How long you have been with this school district

**A. SPECIAL EDUCATION**

(15 minutes)

1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the term "special education?"
2. Take a sheet of paper and write down the three most important issues that principals have to deal with respect to special education?
3. Tell me the issues you wrote down...(TALLY ON FLIP CHART)
4. For the issues that are on the flip chart ask:
  - Do you think that [Special Education Director] and [Superintendent] would agree with this list?
  - Do you think that principals in other school districts in the state would agree with this list? What about principals in other states?
5. In 1997, Congress re-authorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for the seventh time since 1975. As part of this Act the Congress identified nine areas of interest in which it wanted to track progress being made by states, school districts, and schools. **HAND OUT SHEET WITH NINE AREAS OF INTEREST.** As you can see, some of the areas of congressional interest have been included in IDEA for a long time (some dating back to the original 1975 legislation), while others are new.

- How well do you think the issues identified by Congress line up with the issues that you identified as most important? Are all of the issues that you identified included in the issues identified by Congress? Are there any issues identified by Congress that were not included on your list of important issues? MAKE TWO LISTS

## **B. ADDRESSING THE NINE CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES**

(45 minutes)

I'd like to spend some time talking about the 1997 Amendments and what impact they have had on your school.

1. How did you first learn about these issues (Nine Congressional Issues)?

Probe:

- School District Special Education Director
- Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent of Schools
- State Department of Education
- Professional publications (e.g., Education Weekly)
- Professional meetings

2. How did this district assess the implications of these Amendments for your district?

Probe:

- Special Education Director did an assessment
- Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent did assessment
- Committee did assessment
- Principals did their own assessments
- No formal assessments conducted

3. What guidance was provided by the State Department of Education?

4. What were the results of this assessment?

Probe:

- Did the district need to change some of its policies and procedures? LIST ON THE FLIP CHART THE PROVISIONS THAT PROMPTED CHANGES

5. For each of the provisions listed on the flip chart ask:

5a. Describe the school district's policies and procedures that were in place in 1997?

5b. What are the new policies and procedures?

5c. How were the new policies and procedures developed?

Probe:

- Developed by special education director.
- Developed by committee (composition of the committee district administrators/principals/teachers/parents/interest groups/others).
- Was there any community input? Describe.
- What guidance did the state provide?

5d. Have the new policies and procedures been fully implemented yet? If not describe progress made and timetable for full implementation.

5e. Describe the district's implementation strategy. Barriers? Facilitators?

5f. How have the new policies and procedures affected your school?

Probe:

- Describe the changes that have occurred in your school.
- Did your school receive any assistance or guidance from the district to help make these changes? Describe.
- Did anything hinder or facilitate making these changes? Describe.
- What additional changes do you expect to make?

**C. BEHAVIORAL ISSUES (If not already addressed)**  
(45 minutes)

I'd like to spend some time discussing how your school deals with behavioral problems.

1. Describe the most common behavioral problems in your school? Have these changed over the last five or so years? Describe changes.
2. What are your most serious concerns with regard to handling behavioral problems? Have these changed over the last five years or so? Describe.
3. How does your school deal with behavioral problems?

Probe:

- Are there any formal policies and procedures? Describe.
- What triggers a special education placement? Has this changed over the last five years or so? Describe.

The 1997 Amendments made several important changes with respect to how schools must deal with students with behavioral disabilities. Most importantly,

- Emphasizes the need for schools to provide *positive behavioral interventions* to students whose behavior impedes his or her progress; and
- Emphasizes the need for IEP teams to *determine whether a student's behavior is related to his or her disability* before a student may be disciplined in the same manner as students without a disability.

4. What impact have these provisions had on your school?

Probe:

- Made the school less likely to classify students as having disabilities.
  - Made dealing with discipline problems more/less difficult? In what ways?
  - School had to provide additional training and support to classroom teachers and other school personnel. Describe.
  - Increased the tension between general education and special education interests.
  - Made the development of IEPs more difficult. In what ways? Functional assessments? Describe.
5. What guidance or assistance did your school district provide to help you implement the new provisions?

Probe:

- Written policies and procedures?
  - Special training for administrators, teachers, or other school personnel? Describe.
  - Additional staff support or additional funds? Describe.
6. How have teachers reacted to the new requirements?
7. Does the school district or state monitor how these provisions are being implemented at the school level? Describe.

#### **D. WRAP UP** (5 minutes)

We've covered a lot of ground in the last two hours. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about serving students with disabilities in your schools? Thank you.