

Appendix – Organizing and Conducting Discussion Groups

In order to understand the choices that parents in your area make, you should consider holding informal discussion groups at the school (or better yet, at a rectory if a room is available). School parents should be interviewed separately from parents of children at other schools.

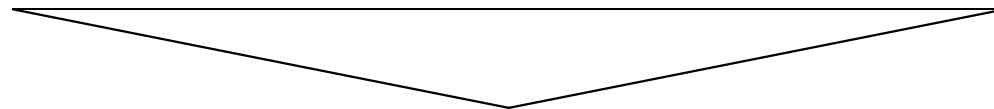
OBJECTIVES FOR INFORMAL DISCUSSION GROUPS

Determine why and how some parents chose the school

- Top reasons for making their choice
- Relative importance of other factors
- Factors on which your school has advantages or disadvantages vs. other alternatives
- Drawbacks of your school
- Next-best alternative – where would parent have gone if this school had been full, and why?
- Other schools actively considered
- Timing of the school decision
- Sources of information and persuasion for making the decision
- Frequency of reconsidering schools

Determine why and how some parents did not choose the school

- Top reasons for making their choice
- Relative importance of other factors
- Factors on which their school has advantages or disadvantages vs. your school
- Perceived drawbacks of your school
- Next-best alternative – where would parent have gone if their choice had not been available (does not apply for parents with kids in local public schools)?
- Other schools actively considered
- Timing of the school decision
- Sources of information and persuasion for making the decision
- Frequency of reconsidering schools



Understand the views of a broader audience than just the very active parents who do most of the volunteer work for the school

Recruiting a facilitator and participants will be the challenging parts of the process of setting up discussion groups. Principals, pastors, and teachers should not be present in the discussions. Schools' parents ideally should not be in the facilitator role.

STEPS FOR PUTTING TOGETHER DISCUSSION GROUPS



- The ideal person would be a professional focus group moderator, but they are very expensive unless one is willing to do it for free
- Whoever you choose should have relatively little involvement with the school – one idea would be to recruit a volunteer and trade with a neighboring parish. Failing that, try for a parishioner with
- Samples on pages A – 3, A – 4
- Gather lists of prospective participants
- Schedule dates and times – likely two 1-hour sessions with school parents and two 1-hour sessions with other parents
- Issue invitations by telephone
- Follow up with confirmation notes
- Target 6-8 parents per group
- Make it clear that selling the school is not the purpose of the meeting – it is to gather opinions
- Have a note-taker who will write the summary
- Principals, pastors, and teachers should not be involved in the discussion groups
- Write a summary of top reasons for choosing schools, perceived advantages and disadvantages of your school, other schools considered, sources of information used by parents, and other issues raised

A discussion with parents in your school should include a brief introduction, reasons for choosing the school, the decision process, price sensitivity, and priorities for improvements.

GROUP DISCUSSION OUTLINE – PARENTS OF CHILDREN IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

EXAMPLE

1. Have parents introduce themselves – first name, number and age of kids, and the situation of their families with regard to Catholic school
 - Are either or both parents Catholic?
 - Did the parents go to Catholic school for some, or all, of their school years?
 - Do or did all of their children go to Catholic school? For all of their school years?
 - If there are preschool age children in the family, or if there may be more children in the future, how likely are they to go to Catholic school?
 - Are the children happy in their school?
2. Discuss reasons for choosing Catholic school
 - Have all the participants write down their top 3 reasons for making the choice they made – then read and discuss
 - Importance of other possible factors – quality of education, spiritual/religious aspects, character/values, discipline, safety, location, student body, faculty, price, extracurricular activities, facilities/physical plant, special needs of students, others
 - What was the next best alternative and why was this Catholic school chosen over it? (Where would you have sent your child if this school had been full and you could not get him or her in?)
 - Perceived drawbacks/disadvantages of Catholic school
3. Understand the decision process
 - When was the decision made?
 - How was the decision made?
 - Is the decision revisited annually, or more or less often than annually, or ever?
4. Understand price sensitivity
 - How big a factor was tuition price in the decision?
 - Would a significant tuition increase force a reevaluation?
5. Improvements to the school
 - If the school were to get any more money, how should it best be spent?

A discussion with other parents would focus more on why they chose another school, including perceived advantages and disadvantages of your school versus their choice.

GROUP DISCUSSION OUTLINE – PARENTS OF CHILDREN NOT IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

1. Have parents introduce themselves – first name, number and age of kids, and the situation of their families with regard to Catholic school
 - Are both parents Catholic?
 - Did the parents go to Catholic school in their school years?
 - Did any of their children ever go to Catholic school for part or all of their school years?
 - Are the children happy in their school?
2. Understand reasons for choosing the school they chose
 - Have all the participants write down their top 3 reasons for making the choice they made – then read and discuss
 - Importance of other possible factors – public schools are free could not afford tuition, quality of education, character/values, discipline, safety, location, student body, faculty, price, extracurricular activities, facilities/physical plant, special needs of students, others
 - Next best alternative and why this school was chosen over it
 - Perceived drawbacks/disadvantages of Catholic vs. the school chosen
 - What could have made Catholic school a more attractive option?
3. Understand the decision process
 - If in public school, was there ever a "decision" process per se, or was it automatic?
 - When was the decision made?
 - How was the decision made?
 - Is the decision revisited annually, or more or less often than annually, or ever?
4. Understand price sensitivity
 - How big a factor was tuition price in the decision?
 - If at a private school, would a significant tuition increase force a reevaluation?
 - If at a public school, would a significant tuition cut or financial aid options affect the decision?

Recruiting school parents should be relatively straightforward. Getting a good mix of nonschool parents is usually tougher, particularly if you try to reach beyond religious-education parents.

THOUGHTS ON RECRUITING DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS

For school parents

- Pick a point in the middle of the alphabet and call every 10th parent until you have enough scheduled. Start over at the beginning when needed

For nonschool parents

- Take a similar approach through the religious education list
- Try to supplement the group with some nonreligious- education parents, if possible. Since lists of these parents are unlikely to be available you may have to do some unrandom recruiting (e.g., friends of school board or marketing team members). If you recruit friends, or friends of friends, this way, the recruiter should not be in the discussion group
- Include non-Catholics, if they are part of your target market
- Assure Directors of Religious Education that the purpose of the discussion is not to "convert"

The following worksheet can be used to schedule parents in the different discussion groups

SAMPLE SCHEDULE SHEET

Parents with children in Catholic school

Discussion Group 1
Date: _____
Time: _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
(7.) _____
(8.) _____
(9.) _____
(10.) _____

Parents with children not in Catholic school

Discussion Group 2
Date: _____
Time: _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
(7.) _____
(8.) _____
(9.) _____
(10.) _____

Parents with children not in Catholic school


Discussion Group
Date: _____
Time: _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
(7.) _____
(8.) _____
(9.) _____
(10.) _____

Discussion Group
Date: _____
Time: _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
(7.) _____
(8.) _____
(9.) _____
(10.) _____

Discussion facilitators should direct, but not dominate, the discussion. Setting the tone and purpose at the beginning is very important.

ADVICE TO FACILITATORS

State your purpose up front

- You want to understand how parents choose schools, and what could be improved at this school
- You are not here to persuade anyone to change his or her school choice
- Hand out a written agenda 

Be a "blank slate"

- Do not bring any of your feelings, opinions, or preconceived notions into the discussions
- Do not bring any facts into the discussion, or try to correct panelists' statements – even if you are certain that they are factually wrong

Make sure everyone talks

- Have everyone introduce him or herself after you state your purpose and the ground rules
- Have everyone write down answers to "Why did you choose..." questions
- Direct follow-up questions to nontalkers

Set the ground rules next

- One person speaks at a time
- Everyone participates
- Different opinions are welcome; if people have different points of view, we want to know that
- Do not attempt to persuade each other, resolve disagreements, or reach consensus
- My report will not mention who said what

Be aware of time

- Have an idea in advance of roughly how much time you want to spend on each subject
- Step in and move to another subject if conversation is not moving along

Be polite

- Thank everyone for participating
- Get everyone out on schedule

The following instructions may be helpful to the facilitator when conducting a discussion group.

SAMPLE FACILITATOR GUIDEEXAMPLE

1. Hand out the agenda
2. Open the discussion with an introduction
 - Introduce yourself and your background
 - State the purpose of the discussion
 - Set the ground rules for the discussion
3. Ask everyone to introduce themselves with the following –
 - Name
 - Ages/grades of children and where they go to school
 - If they themselves are alumni of Catholic grammar school
4. Pass out paper and pens. Ask everyone to write down the top 2 or 3 reasons they chose their schools
5. Go around the room soliciting attendee responses. Sometimes this will spark discussion by itself
6. After everyone has mentioned their reasons, lead off the next part of the discussion with one of the questions. Allow parents to volunteer answers. Allow the discussion to ensue. Do not feel obligated to get an answer to every question from every participant. Move on to another question if the conversation is not moving or if you feel the subject has been thoroughly discussed

The agenda handout should be very simple – not the detailed question list in the hands of the moderator.

SAMPLE AGENDA SHEET

Topics for tonight's discussion	
Topic	Approximate time
Introductions and ground rules	:15
Reasons that people did (not) choose Catholic school. (Everyone will be asked to write down their top 3 reasons. These will be used to start a discussion. They will not be collected)	:25
Decision processes	:10
Impact of tuition levels	:05
Improvements to the school	:05