

How Schools and Districts Can Use Focus Teams to Lead and Sustain Improvement

Schools rise or fall depending on whether they foster a culture in which multiple stakeholders have a voice in decision-making.

Teamwork and collaboration are even more critical as schools begin developing recovery plans to tackle unfinished learning and help students engage with grade-level content in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Focus teams (see our [Focus Teams Guide for more information](#)) are an essential element of SREB's Making Schools Work approach to continuous school improvement: We've been helping schools nationwide organize their faculty and school communities into *focus teams that facilitate meaningful, sustainable change* since 1987.

Focus teams can play an essential role in helping districts and schools develop strong plans to spend a much-needed infusion of federal stimulus funds — plans that reinvent education to address equity, poverty, weak infrastructures and the social and emotional health of students and teachers.

“To change organizations for the better, you must give people the opportunity to change the ways they think and interact.”

— Peter Senge,
The Dance of Change (1999)



The Who, What, Why and How of Focus Teams

What is a focus team?

A focus team is a group of individuals with different responsibilities and interests who share a common purpose — making school engaging, relevant and relatable for all students. Teams identify specific needs or problems and take the lead in developing and implementing strategies and programs to address them.

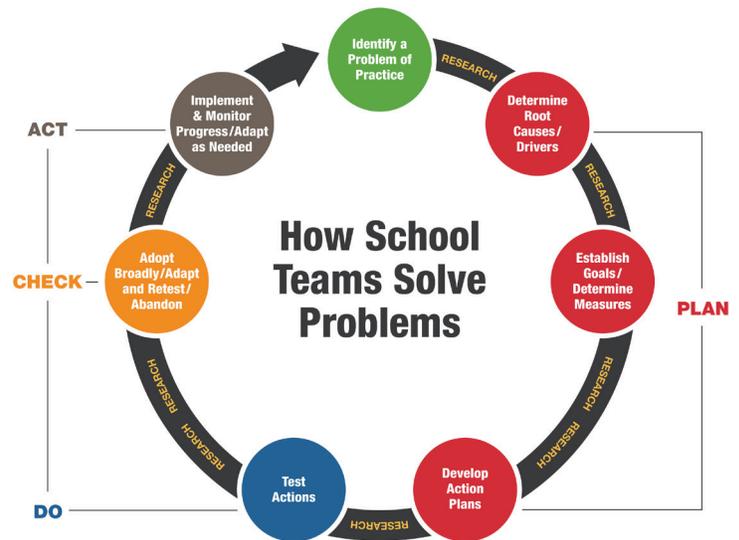
Why use focus teams?

By engaging teachers and the school community in analyzing problems, developing plans, establishing goals and monitoring progress, teachers and leaders truly own school improvement

efforts instead of feeling like changes are being imposed upon them. Focus teams:

- **Give teachers more time to talk about their work.** Schools often lack time during the day for teachers to discuss their instructional practices, use of data or working environment. Focus teams ensure quality meetings by offering both structure and accountability.
- **Help sustain outcomes even through change.** Often when leadership shifts occur, procedures, norms and visions have to be re-established. Focus teams provide an anchor in times of transition.

SREB's Problem-Solving Process



- **Improve communication.** Focus teams establish uniform, regularly scheduled communication practices that inform and celebrate the school community's accomplishments.
- **Generate better ideas.** As Andrew Carnegie said, "teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision, the ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results."
- **Share responsibility.** In focus teams, diverse stakeholders have both a voice and a stake in school improvement. Teams empower each member to own the outcomes of their efforts.

How do focus teams work?

Focus teams are structured as formal committees with chairs, reporters and meeting minutes. The team's charge is to address a specific problem of practice — like how to address unfinished learning.

Using a **problem-solving process**, the team seeks the root causes of the problem and develops goals and plans to solve it, such as implementing summer learning. Each team member shares plans with others and researches new ideas. Once implementation of improvement strategies begins, the team ensures fidelity of implementation — and takes ownership of the results.

What makes focus teams effective?

For more than 30 years, school leaders have told us that focus teams thrive when:

- **Clear goals are put in writing**, so each member fully understands the duties of the team.
- **Defined roles** help each team member know what is expected.

- **Teams cultivate a culture of improvement** in which members respect each other's opinions, collaboratively foster a sense of security and trust, and boost each other's morale.
- **Shared accountability standards** hold the whole team responsible for tracking progress and sharing documentation of their efforts and outcomes with team leads and school leaders.
- **A diverse membership** reflects the widest possible range of backgrounds, experiences and talents in the school community. Equity, creativity and quality are celebrated.
- **Members communicate at the right time and with the right tools.** A mix of written, face-to-face and virtual communications and meetings promote clarity of messaging.



Learn More

SREB staff include experienced former school, district and state leaders who are ready to help local education agencies and schools harness the power of focus teams to develop recovery fund plans.

Email maw@creb.org or call 404-879-5613 to get started.