

How to Conduct School-Based Empathy Interviews

- Plan for the Interview:
 - [What are Empathy Interviews?](#)
 - [Who Conducts Interviews?](#)
 - [Identifying the Student Population: Who Needs Trust Fostered?](#)
 - [How Do You Get Informed Consent?](#)
- During the Interview:
 - [How Do You Conduct Empathy Interviews?](#)
- Study the Interview:
 - [How Do You Learn from Your Empathy Interviews?](#)
- Act on the Interview:
 - [How Do You Use Your Analysis?](#)
- Resources:
 - [Empathy Interview Staff Preparation Template](#)
 - [Suggested Topics and Questions](#)
 - [School-Based Empathy Interview Template](#)
 - [Example Process for Empathy Interviews](#)

What are Empathy Interviews?

An empathy interview is a short series of open-ended questions where the goal is to explore a subject's experience of a topic by invoking stories which can be relayed into themes. These interviews are typically short, ranging from 30 minutes to an hour. By conducting a series of empathy interviews, institutions can analyze the results to inform process improvements and system iterations. From a school-based lens, educators may learn about individual students' barriers by conducting this process. This then opens another opportunity, not just for system improvement, but for identifying and responding to student needs.

Interviewers are encouraged to ask follow-up questions and use intuitive relational skills to give the subject a guided space to explore whatever experiences come up for them from the questions. In addition to system improvement and identifying individual needs, even just conducting the interview may invoke a deeper sense of connection and trust between the student and the school.

Who Conducts Interviews?

The interviewer should be someone who can, or already has, fostered trust with the selected students and can maintain ownership over any follow-up that is needed, post-interview. Additionally, your interviewer should have access to resources related to the chosen topic of the interview. For example, if a teacher is conducting the interview and plans to ask students about reliable transportation, but it is the people on the family engagement team who have access to bus passes and organizing school pick-ups, then it is likely that someone from that team would be a better interviewer. However, if you are addressing needs in the classroom, the teacher may be the best fit.

The important thing is not credentialing. Empathy interviews are relational, first and foremost. Both power dynamics and positionality between the interviewer and the student can make a tremendous impact on what the student is willing to share. The closer the interviewer is to addressing the needs of the interview topic, the better chances you have at increasing trust. You would not ask your friend if they needed a ride to the airport if you were not able to drive them; the same logic applies here.

Regardless of the role, it is important that the interviewer possesses these relational skills:

- Able to connect on an interpersonal level with students and families.
- Commitment to unpacking their own biases and positional power.
- Ability to speak the primary language of the interviewee.
- Ability to be a good listener.

Identifying the Student Population: Who Needs Trust Fostered?

Like the interviewer, which students you interview will be dependent on your local context and the topics being explored. In the aforementioned transportation example, you might identify potential candidates by considering students with high tardies and/or low attendance. If you are assessing mental health concerns, you may ask the school counselor for potential candidates. What is important is that you interview students who represent the margins. While all kinds of students can benefit from empathy interviews, it is critical that you are interviewing those who the school system may not be working for and those who fly under the radar of support. This is not to say that questions should inherently seek negativity, but as the simple act of conducting an empathy interview may increase trust from students, consider asking yourself, *who is it that needs a fostering of trust?* Not every student is fit for every topic, and you should have a clear and consistent reason which relates to every student chosen.

How Do You Get Informed Consent?

You will be asking students questions which may relate to deeply personal topics that extend beyond academics. As such, it is paramount that you ensure each and every interviewee has been adequately informed of what an empathy interview is, how you will be recording their information, and what you plan to do with that information. **Regardless, you must ensure that you follow your district policies on informed consent.** You may want to remind them that you are a mandatory reporter, and that certain disclosures may require interventions beyond the interview.

By explaining to students the parameters of the interview and who will be privy to the information they provide, schools are better able to empower students to make informed decisions around what they feel comfortable sharing. The trust that empathy interviews may foster is conditioned on the idea that they have a full, developmentally appropriate understanding of what is being asked of them and why.

How Do You Conduct Empathy Interviews?

An empathy interview can serve any number of goals even if the questions are not meant to solicit binary responses. The problems you are trying to solve will ultimately lead back to student success. However, the questions may be more focused on the various factors, both inside and out of the classroom, which affect a student's sense of belonging and wellness, and contributes to their ability to access their education. Some factors which may increase your success in conducting empathy interviews:

- Bring a notetaker or recording device so that the focus of the interviewer can be on the student. Ensure that they are comfortable with whatever method you choose and that they know notes will be taken.
- Conduct the interview in a quiet, low-traffic space and, to the extent possible, minimize potential distractions and interruptions. Create a space that feels comfortable, safe, and private.
- Explain to the student why you are conducting the interview and what their responses will be used for.
- Encourage the student to ask questions when they have them.
- Express gratitude for the student's time and participation.

How Do You Learn from Your Empathy Interviews?

It is important that the interviewers are part of the team analyzing the results as they may have some keen insights that come up during the review process. The other staff involved should be as close to the decision-makers as possible, when it comes to the topics that were investigated. Where decision-makers are not available for the analysis process, consider how you can articulate your analysis into a strong case for systemic change that you can present to decision-makers (see the [Using Your Analysis](#) section for more).

It is important that your team looks for common themes and debriefs them together, to ensure that systemic changes can be addressed. This process works best when it is led by a staff member who has experience doing needs assessments or other systemic reviews. Don't be afraid to look for quantitative data within your qualitative answers. For example, if you asked fifty students who are consistently tardy about how they get to school, and ten of them described unreliable transportation, ("Mom/dad takes me but sometimes can't because of work." "The bus by my house doesn't come often and missing it means waiting another 45 minutes.") You may chart these as saying that 20% of students interviewed indicated having unreliable daily transportation to school. Because these are qualitative answers, make sure multiple people review the same notes so that everyone finds agreement on the conclusions made from the data. In the above example of a student whose mom/dad sometimes can't take them to school, one staff member may see this as fairly reliable since they indicated they usually have transportation, while other staff may disagree. This is why it is important that the interviewer is there because, in discussing the results, they are likely to have keen insights that are difficult to parse out from the notes alone.

Finally, it is important that you do not make interpretations of your data that stretch beyond what is actually there. A sample population is still just a sample. Your analysis may give you some strong clues to investigate and may lead to real actionable change, but even after updating processes and systems, never forget that correlation does not equal causation. Analysis is useful but always remember that schools are an ever-changing population. To that end, empathy interviews are a tool that you can utilize repeatedly to gain meaningful snapshots even if they can't capture the full picture.

How Do You Use Your Analysis?

Analysis is only as useful as it is applicable as an agent of change. Some themes may emerge from your analysis that you were not expecting. You may want to review your de-identified analysis with various teams and partners, both within and outside of school buildings. On classroom and culture, you may want to present your findings to the

superintendent or principal. On items related to housing, food, or transportation, you may want to convene the findings with outside partners who have resources to help address any highlighted issues.

A student's sense of belonging and wellness can greatly impact their ability to access their education. By conducting empathy interviews, you have an opportunity to build direct connections between students and staff and show, actionably, how you consider student experience in school community planning. These valuable findings may be useful in budgeting future years and assessing further resources.

Regardless, if you conduct your empathy interviews wisely, you are likely to build a stronger sense of trust between students and staff. Empathy interviews are a great way to address school needs, while showing students that their voices matter.

Resources

- [Empathy Interview Staff Preparation Template](#)
- [Suggested Topics and Questions](#)
- [School-Based Empathy Interview Template](#)
- [Example Process for Empathy Interviews](#)

Empathy Interview Staff Preparation Template

Answer the questions below to determine if your school is ready to begin empathy interviews for students.

☐ What is the topic(s) you are curious about and why?
Click or tap here to enter text.
☐ What avenues are available to aid students with needs surrounding your chosen topic(s)? What local resources are available?
Click or tap here to enter text.
☐ Who on staff will conduct the interviews? Why are they best suited to address this topic?
Click or tap here to enter text.
☐ Who is leading the interview process and analysis? Who will explore interview themes?
Click or tap here to enter text.
☐ How have students been identified? Does your process include students with needs relating to the topic(s)?
Click or tap here to enter text.
☐ Where will you conduct the interview, and how will you make the space comfortable for students during the interview?
Click or tap here to enter text.
☐ What are your district policies on student safety? Are the interviewers comfortable elevating concerns surrounding suicidality, threats of violence, unsafe living conditions, and more, should they arise during the interview?
Click or tap here to enter text.

Suggested Topics and Questions

Any topic chosen should be something that the school can reasonably address if a need arises. You can pull questions below for the [empathy interview template](#) , underneath this section.

Developmental Disclaimer:

These suggested questions are not formatted with a particular grade level in mind. Questions may need to be modified depending on the age group you are interviewing. You can plug these questions into the template below, but ultimately, center phrasing around your local context.

Warm Opening

- Tell me about yourself.
- How are you feeling today?
- What's one thing you like to do to relax?
- What is something good that happened recently?
- Tell me about your favorite part of a school day.
- Do you have any questions for me before we start?

Classroom Culture

- Tell me about a normal day in class.
- Tell me about a time when you went to your teacher for help. What happened?
- Tell me about a time when you didn't get along with another student. What did you do?
- Tell me about a time you felt really welcomed at school. Who made you feel welcomed and how?
- Tell me about a time when you asked someone at school for help with class work. Who did you ask and why?
- Tell me about a time when you felt really connected with another student. What happened, and why/how did you feel connected?

Transportation

- Tell me about your morning routine. What happens before you get to school?
- Tell me about a time when the normal way you get to school wasn't available.

- Tell me about a time when you were late for school. What happened?

Food Security

- Tell me about the first thing you ate today. What do you think will be the last thing you eat today?
- Tell me about a time when you didn't have enough food at school. What did you do?
- Tell me about the food that makes you feel best. When was the last time you had it?

Health and Other Basic Needs

- Tell me about a time when the way your body felt affected your ability to learn.
- Tell me about a time you felt pain during class. What did you do?
- Tell me about a time when you stayed home from school for a reason other than temporary illness (such as a cold). Why did you stay home? Did anyone from school talk to you?
- Tell me about a time you needed something for school other than school supplies. Who did you talk to?

Warm Closure

- Tell me about something you are looking forward to.
- What makes you excited to come to school?
- Is there anything you wish I had asked you about?
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School Based Empathy Interview Template

Topics(s): Click or tap here to enter text.

District Consent Policies: Click or tap here to enter text.

Warm Opening Question 1	Response
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Warm Opening Question 2	Response
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Topic Question 1	Response
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Topic Question 2	Response
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.

Topic Question 3	Response
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Topic Question 4	Response
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Topic Question 5	Response
Note: It is recommended that you do not ask more than 4 or 5 questions in a half-hour interview.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Topic Question 6	Response
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.

Example Process for Empathy Interviews

- **Identifying the Issue:**
 - A high school has discovered that the number of breakfasts served in the morning has decreased by 15% over the last year without a decrease in student population.
 - School administrators hypothesize that this decrease is contributing to tardiness in morning classes.
 - The school is interested in conducting empathy interviews on tardiness and is curious if this decrease in school breakfasts is a contributing factor.
- **Identifying the Student Population:**
 - School administrators identify candidates by finding students with high rates of absence in their morning classes.
 - Additionally, they may seek out other students who qualify for free or reduced breakfasts that are not utilizing the program.
 - Identified students are briefed according to the district's consent policies.
- **Identifying the Interviewers:**
 - Their morning teacher may be the interviewer, or perhaps someone from the school's family engagement team.
 - Priority is given to interviewers who have existing trusting relationships with students and can commit time to both analyzing the results and addressing needs that arise out of the interview.
- **Conducting the Interview:**
 - Students may be asked a handful of questions related to their morning routine and access to food. Questions are open-ended, conducted by a trusted adult, and non-invasive.
 - The interviewer encourages the student to speak from personal experience and asks follow-up questions when the student shares something meaningful.
 - If safety concerns arise (suicidality, threats of violence, etc..), the interviewer is equipped to escalate the concern to the appropriate channel, per their district policies.
- **Analyzing the Interview:**
 - After interviewing thirty students, the school administrators and interviewers analyzed the answers and found a recurring theme of students arriving by public bus after breakfast service had ended. These students were purchasing breakfast from the fast-food restaurant across the street, contributing to their tardiness.

- Four of the interviewed students also made comments suggesting they have unreliable transportation to school.

- **Changes Made Post-Interview:**

- In response, the school increased its breakfast program by ten minutes so that students would not be significantly late for class by going off campus for breakfast.
- The students with unreliable transportation were given bus passes or added to pick-up schedules with other students.
- Trust between the students and the school increased because questions were asked by a trusted adult who was able to see that follow-up occurred, both systemically and interpersonally.

