How well is your high school preparing students, especially low-income students, to graduate on time, ready for college-level work, and with a college or technical school acceptance letter in hand? The College Pathways series (see sidebar) is designed to help schools answer that question, as well as understand and adopt practices that researchers have identified as common to high schools that graduate a high percentage of low-income students and send them on to college.

The tools in this series are intended to be used together in order to involve the full school community – educators, families, students, and community members – in assessing your school’s efforts and finding ways to strengthen them. The tools are: a framework and rubric to help assess how well your school’s practices align with practices in high-performing high schools; a survey to gather data on students’ perspectives; and focus group protocols for students and families to deepen understanding and help people learn from each other. All the tools have been field tested.

About the Families Focus Group Protocol
The tool includes a short parent survey that can be used as a handout. A focus group discussion is a good way to find out what people really think about a topic. A small group of six to ten people with a common interest, such as their children’s education, talking together can deepen understanding, develop ideas, and help people learn from each other.

A focus group is a “moderated conversation” of one-to-two hours about a specific topic – in this case, how well families think their children's school is preparing them to graduate and go to college. A moderator asks a series of related, open-ended questions and keeps a record of the responses.

How the College Pathways Series Was Developed
The College Pathways series grew out of the findings in Beating the Odds, a study of thirteen high-performing New York City high schools by Carol Ascher and Cindy Maguire for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Each of the schools admitted ninth-graders with high poverty rates and far-below-average reading and math scores but produced four-year graduation rates and college acceptance above the district average, and well above other high schools serving similar students.

The study identified four “key components” common to these “beat the odds” schools:
- Academic rigor
- A network of timely supports
- A culture of college access
- Effective use of data

To help other schools benefit from what these schools have learned, the Annenberg Institute has developed a set of tools that schools can use to assess their status in the key component areas and to strengthen their practices to put all their students on a pathway to college.

The Beating the Odds study and the full set of tools (Rubric, Student Survey and Focus Group Protocol, and Parent Focus Group Protocol) are available at: www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/BTO.php
Conducting the Focus Groups

To understand how different families feel about what is offered at your school, we suggest holding a series of focus groups, each directed at families with similar backgrounds. To reach these families, you will probably need to have some meetings in the neighborhoods where they live. If you have partnerships with community groups or religious organizations, they can invite people who have students in your school to their facility. Just make sure that each group is no more than ten people.

You can also ask your parent organization to sponsor a focus group at the school. To reach out beyond the most involved parents, it may be useful to ask a parent coordinator or other staff member who works with families to help you reach out. You will get more experienced responses from parents whose children have been in the school more than a year. If you want to find out how new families are responding to your activities and programs, do a special group for them.

Following the tips below, you’ll find a protocol with a script for the focus group discussion. Start with the general questions, one at a time; use prompts (a few are suggested for each question) if the discussion lags or people get off track.

Tips on Moderating the Discussion

1. Be clear that the purpose of the focus group is to stimulate a discussion about
   a. how well families think their school is preparing their students to graduate and go to college, and
   b. how they, as family members, feel they can be most useful in supporting their children’s success.

2. Be sure to explain to participants at the beginning of the meeting that everything they say will be treated confidentially. Their ideas will not be attributed to them without their permission. Also ask people to agree not to gossip later about what is said in the room.

3. To draw out the full range of opinions, or to see if an opinion is shared by others, you may need to stop the conversation and ask: “This person made this comment, what do others think? Does anyone have a different take on this issue?” If someone has been quiet, ask if they would like to comment.

4. As the moderator, it’s essential that you be neutral, and that you make it safe for opinions to be expressed freely. Keep your own comments to a minimum. If there’s a period of silence, keep quiet to allow others to think. Doing so can create space for more quiet people to respond.

5. Ask one question at a time. Make it clear that all opinions are welcome and will be respected. Give people at least 15 seconds to respond before using a prompt.

6. Start with the general questions and use the prompts to be more specific. To stimulate discussion, you can offer opposing positions on an issue that comes up. For example, you could say: “Some people think the college prep program at this school is just for the better-off kids, but others think that it’s for all kids. What do you think?”

7. You can end the focus group by passing out the parent survey and asking parents to check where they think the school is in each area. This will give you additional data from parents.

Tips on the Process

1. If the group is larger than ten people, it can be broken into smaller groups that discuss each question and then report back to the larger group.

2. It is useful to put up a sheet of chart paper for each question and assign a note-taker to record comments. This will enable participants to see and reflect on what they have said.
3. If you are planning to audio-record the conversation, make sure you have enough microphones so that every speaker can be heard clearly.

4. Because you will be conducting several focus groups and will want to compare the results, make sure that the same questions are asked to each group.

5. If a parent coordinator is part of the focus group, that person should be advised in advance not to correct what parents say about the activities offered by the school, even if they may be wrong.

6. Although this focus group is for parents, the attendance of a few students can enrich the discussion. So feel free to include students, if they come with their parents. But make clear that the point is to hear from parents.

7. The participants will want to know the results after all the groups are held. This would be an excellent topic for a parent group meeting or an article in the school newsletter or other reports and news bulletins.
Families Focus Group
Protocol and Script

Welcome Participants and Introduce Yourself
Begin the session by welcoming everyone and introducing yourself and your co-facilitator/note-taker. Explain your role in the school community.

Explain the Purpose of the Discussion
SAY: “_____ School is committed to working more closely with families to help all students graduate on time, ready for college or more education. We want to learn from you about how to do a better job of this. The purpose of this discussion is to learn how you think the school is doing, in an atmosphere of safety and confidentiality, with no negative consequences to you or your school. All ideas are welcome and will be treated with respect.”

Explain What You’re Going to Do and Ask Permission to Record
SAY: “We’re [or I’m] going to ask you a few questions about how _____ School is preparing your students, and how well the school has worked with you to support your students’ success. This should take about an hour and a half – or maybe two hours if you have a lot of ideas!

“We want to be sure that everyone feels free to speak his or her mind. Please listen to the ideas of others with an open mind and respect their privacy. What we say in this room should stay in this room – will you agree to do that?

“With your permission, we’d like to tape our conversation and write down your thoughts and ideas on chart paper. Everything you say will be treated confidentially; no specific opinions will be attributed to any particular person, unless you first give us explicit permission. Is that OK?

“Any questions before we get started?”

Ask Participants to Introduce Themselves
SAY: “Now, tell us a little something about you. Let’s go around the table [room/circle] and introduce ourselves – what is your first name, how many children do you have in the school, and what grade(s) are they in?”

Begin the Discussion
*Important:* Wait at least 15 seconds after asking a question to give people time to respond. Use the prompts only if no one speaks up or to get the discussion back on track.

1. How well do you think _____ School is preparing students to graduate with the academic background necessary for college?
**Prompts (use as needed)**

Does the principal talk to you about the importance of graduating and going to college? Do your child’s teachers? Does your child?

What do they [the principal, teachers, your son or daughter] say?

What else could the school be doing? Why do you think that?

2. Do you think that your sons and daughters are being pushed hard enough to do their best work at _____ School?

**Prompts**

Does your son or daughter do a lot of homework? Does he or she feel they are doing too little or too much?

How do you know?

How could your kids be pushed harder?

3. What are the major barriers to your child going to college?

**Prompts**

Are the barriers academic, financial, other?

Does your child seem interested in college?

Do you see going to college as something that is important for your children?

What would make going to college easier?

4. How has _____ School reached out to you to make sure your son or daughter graduates promptly and goes to college?

**Prompts**

Do the teachers or counselors keep you up to date on how your kids are doing?

Does the school let you know what classes your child should be taking?

What other ways do you think you could help?

5. What could _____ School do better to help you make sure your son or daughter graduates promptly and goes to college?

**Prompts**

Offer information on, or trips to, colleges?

Inform you about financial aid?

Help you fill out forms?

**Close the Discussion**

It may be useful to close by handing out the Parent Survey, “How Well Is Your School Preparing Students for College?” which is part of the tool set. Parents can fill it out at the meeting and discuss it briefly and/or take it home to discuss further with their families.

Thank parents for participating.

Where appropriate, assure them that their ideas will be reported to the school improvement team and/or the parent organization, and that a short report will be posted on the school Web site.
How well is our high school
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE?

Is our high school doing enough to prepare students to graduate on time ready for college-level work – and with a college or technical school acceptance letter in hand? We want you to help us answer that question.

The discussion you participated in was based on a study of thirteen high-performing New York City high schools (*Beating the Odds*, by Carol Ascher and Cindy Maguire). These schools have four-year graduation rates and college attendance above the district average. The chart below shows four qualities these schools shared and what you can look for in our school.

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<th>Effective schools…</th>
<th>What’s happening at our school?</th>
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| 1. Have high expectations and challenging classes for all students. | □ All classes are rigorous and challenging.  
□ All students take college prep and AP classes, even if they’re in a tech/career program.  
□ Teachers and counselors watch carefully to make sure students don’t fall behind. |
| 2. Provide timely supports to help students catch up. | □ Each student has an adult at school they can talk to.  
□ Counselors or advisors help students set detailed plans so they can reach the goal of going to college.  
□ Students get help when they need it so they can catch up quickly.  
□ Students get lots of chances to improve their test-taking skills. |
| 3. Create a college-going climate | □ Students and parents are invited to visit colleges and/or attend college fairs.  
□ The school asks you to help plan and support your student’s goal of going to college.  
□ You and your student get good information about tests, courses, applications and choosing a college.  
□ The school has a “college office” where you can get help and information. |
| 4. Closely track how each student is doing. | □ The school lets you know what percent of its students graduate and go on to college.  
□ The school keeps track of how its graduates do when they go to college.  
□ The school gives you information about how students do on the college tests like the SAT. |

More information about the *Beating the Odds* study (published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University) can be found at: [http://www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/BTO.php](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/BTO.php)