



## Facilitating BFK•Focus

### *A Reference Guide for Users and Facilitators*

#### Why BFK•Focus?

The stakes for educators are higher than they have ever been. Schools are now expected to educate **every student** to a high level of academic achievement. For the first time in history, teachers are being held accountable, not for what they do, but for the performance of their students, especially on high stakes end-of-the-year tests. Given these pressures, it is essential for teachers to continually upgrade and refine their practice. With the advent of value-added measures it has become possible for teachers to really examine the fruits of their labor and to adjust their practice in ways to become more effective.

#### Purpose

The purpose of the BFK•Focus process is for a team of teachers to use student performance data to examine their results, to investigate the factors that are contributing to these results, and chart their way toward more effective teaching and learning practices. Teams can be assembled in the configuration that makes the most sense for the school. Typically, teachers assemble as grade-level teams and/or department teams.

#### Outcomes

The primary outcomes for BFK•Focus are to develop:

1. A clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the current academic program;
2. A clearer understanding of the factors that are contributing to the current level of success;
3. A year-long plan for improvement that includes goals, action steps, expectations and accountabilities;
4. A reporting structure that allows school leaders to stay in touch with the progress being made by particular teaching teams.

#### Structure

BFK•Focus has been structured to be an efficient and effective use of time. The process has enough structure to support beginning planners and enough flexibility to accommodate teams that are accomplished school improvement practitioners.

#### Three levels of analysis

Focused and meaningful instructional improvement is the result of structured planning and thoughtful implementation and oversight procedures. This kind of planning requires that practitioners be able to:

1. Use data to examine the efficacy of the current instructional program;
2. Assess the factors that have produced the current results; and
3. Project forward toward practices that can improve the effectiveness of the team's teaching and learning processes.

BFK•Focus is divided into the following four components:

- **Introduction to BFK•Focus:** In the introductory phase, teachers learn about the content, structure and outcomes of the process and gather the materials necessary to engage the process.
- **Level I: Data analysis:** In Level I, teachers examine their achievement and value-added information to assess their team's current strengths and challenges. Achievement data provide information on the mastery level of students relative to the standards-based system, while value-added results tell teachers how much growth the current program is producing with the students whom they teach.
- **Level II: Root cause analysis:** Two things are accomplished in Level II. First, teachers examine their lists of strengths and challenges and choose one area of strength and one area of challenge to carry forward through the rest of the analysis. To actually produce changes in practice, it is necessary to constrain attention to a minimal number of improvement goals; too many goals result in little to no change in practice.

The second aspect of Level II is a search for “root causes” associated with current results. Is the curriculum appropriately aligned to the standards? Are current instructional patterns working for all students? Are the curricular and instructional resources well suited to the achievement levels of the students we teach? Do teachers have the requisite subject matter knowledge to effectively teach their assignment?

- **Level III: Improvement goal setting:** Level III allows teachers to create SMART Goals and action plans to actualize their improvement strategy. These goals and their associated action plans provide the structure necessary for systematic instructional improvement. These artifacts also provide a way for school leaders to monitor and support teaching teams as they work to improve their effectiveness.

### A facilitated process

BFK•Focus is intended to be a facilitated process. This requires someone who is willing to nudge a team toward deeper analysis and ultimately improved practice. In general, this means that the facilitator should be comfortable with setting expectations for the team and supporting the team after the planning part of the process is concluded.

### Time commitment

The entire process should take no more than four to five hours of face-to-face time. Three 90-minute sessions with each teacher team is ideal. The key to the process is establishing a facilitator and gathering your student performance information prior to beginning BFK•Focus. It is critical to establish a facilitator and gathering your student performance information prior to beginning BFK•Focus.

## Preparing for BFK•Focus

BFK•Focus is a process that asks for strong engagement from teachers. Specifically, teachers need to systematically connect their teaching practice to the academic performance of their students and then to plan for improvement based on that analysis. Engaging teachers in this effort requires some preparation by the school principal and those who will facilitate the process.

These preparatory activities fit into three categories:

1. Preparing your school;
2. Preparing facilitators; and
3. Taking care of logistics.

### Preparing Your School

#### Is your school ready?

When the decision has been made to move forward, some groundwork must be laid. First, the principal should meet with the school leadership team, preferably in the summer, to talk about how and why BFK•Focus will be used. At this meeting, the principal should communicate at least two important messages:

1. Announce the intention to move forward with BFK•Focus.
  - a. Build the rationale using school-level data.
  - b. Propose a timeline and intended outcomes to the leadership team.
2. Assess the staff's readiness.
  - a. Does the staff have a basic understanding of the achievement data and the two core value-added reports used in the process?
  - b. To what extent have staff members participated in conversations that are based in data?

The second important task for the principal is to present relevant school-level information to the entire teaching staff. This is probably best done at one of the regular beginning-of-the-year staff meetings. At this meeting, the principal must set the stage for the work that lies ahead. The first step is to create a sense of urgency around the process. The best approach is to use school- and district-level achievement and progress data. What are the strengths of the district and the school? What are the challenges? What are the urgent needs that must be addressed? Once the principal has begun to develop a sense of urgency, it is important to notify the staff of what is coming and why. Teachers need to understand why the process is important and what they can expect in terms of their time and effort. They should expect to complete some necessary preparation that will make the process more meaningful and effective. Additional information about preparing teachers is listed below.

- **Is your school working on putting the appropriate enabling conditions in place?**

A number of cultural “enabling conditions” support instructional improvement processes. The conditions listed below are not exhaustive, but they serve to highlight aspects of a school culture that support instructional improvement:

1. A clearly articulated vision for continuous improvement is understood at the district and school levels.
2. District policies and frameworks support the continuous improvement mindset.
3. The district and school recognize the importance of data and information for instructional improvement.
4. Educators across the district understand progress and achievement measures.
5. Principals are expected to be instructional leaders.

### **Are teachers ready?**

Teachers need to understand some important concepts to make good use of BFK•Focus. First and foremost, teachers need to understand the achievement information that is included on their school report card and the value-added information that is found on school- and district-level value-added reports and school and district-level diagnostic reports. The more they know about this information, the more efficiently BFK•Focus meetings will run. Teachers should expect that they will learn more about their data as they move through the process. If learning needs are extensive, the process will move more slowly. Ideally, teachers should move through at least the Value-Added Learning Path—Level 2 to prepare them for the value-added information they will be examining in BFK•Focus.

- **Do teachers have access to their value-added and achievement information?**  
To get comfortable with value-added information teachers need to have online access to this information source. The SAS® EVAAS® system allows different levels of access to different staff members. In the long run, it is important to err on the side of providing too much data access as opposed to providing too little. Teachers need to know how to access their state achievement data and what these data mean.
- **Can teachers access, navigate and interpret value-added reports?**  
Teachers who are well equipped to access, navigate and interpret value-added reports will be able to more effectively use value-added information. The online courses in the Value-Added Learning Path—Level 2 provide the information necessary to understand all of the core value-added reports.

### **Preparing to Facilitate BFK•Focus**

#### **The principal's role**

It is strongly recommended that the principal facilitate at least one team through the process so that he or she understands how to support the process and the outcomes. Given this experience, the principal may choose to either facilitate the process for all school teams or delegate that responsibility to other school leaders.

- **Are the facilitators ready?**  
It is essential that each BFK•Focus facilitator in the building have a good understanding of not only the process, but also the value-added and achievement information that supports this process. You cannot facilitate a discussion about value-added analysis without understanding how to access, navigate and interpret value-added reporting. As the group's facilitator, it is your job to make sure that your understanding is sufficiently high to lead the process. Facilitators should move through at least Value-Added Learning Path—Level 3.
- **Do the facilitators have access to value-added and achievement information?**  
Before you can access your school's value-added information, you must have access to the system. Access to the EVAAS® system begins with the district superintendent. The superintendent can provide either district-level access or assign one person as a school administrator. Once a principal has been assigned the school administrator role, the principal can then assign access to other educators within the school.

- **Are the facilitators comfortable in their role?**  
Facilitating a conversation is different from participating in a conversation. As a facilitator, the primary role is to help people engage and profit from the process. This process includes setting team norms, communicating expectations and keeping the conversation moving. Much of the facilitator work as he/she navigates through this process will revolve around asking questions and helping the team get to honest answers. The other important job for the facilitator is to act as group scribe. In the online version of BFK•Focus, the facilitator will be the person who enters the group's ruminations, conclusions and decisions into the system.
- **Have the facilitators managed other data-based school improvement conversations?**  
Teachers, for the most part, are not accustomed to having conversations that connect their practice with student performance information, especially student progress information. These conversations, especially in the beginning, can feel threatening. When starting down this road it is important to be patient and empathetic, but firm about the intent of the process. The fact that educators are not experienced with data-based conversations is not a reason to avoid them. The most important thing to keep in mind is that this conversation is about improvement, whether current performance is strong or weak.
- **Have facilitators navigated through the process?**  
Before you lead others through the process, you should spend some time reviewing each screen to make sure you know how to provide support and guidance. The most important rule for effective facilitation is to minimize surprises.
- **Have facilitators made copies of the necessary achievement and value-added reports?**  
During the process, your team will be asked to examine and interpret particular achievement and value-added information. It's a good idea to have this information available in paper form for the process. You should also be prepared to access the online version of this information if the need arises.

To go through BFK•Focus, you will need at a minimum, your school report card including information on passage rates, AYP and available item analysis results and the district and school value-added and diagnostic reports that are applicable to the team engaging in the process.

- **Have facilitators secured the planning time, space and technology required to conduct the process?**  
Make sure you have secured the space and time to move through BFK•Focus. You will likely need three 90-minute sessions with a team to move through the entire process. Make sure you have a computer with Internet access. It's also useful to have an LCD projector or a Smart Board available so that BFK•Focus and the online reporting are visible to all.
- **Do teachers know about the date and time of the meeting and what they need to do to prepare for it?**  
The BFK•Focus process cannot take place unless all the members of a teacher team are present. This process works with grade-level and department teams, but teachers must be present to produce a plan.

## The Facilitator's Role

The value of BFK•Focus is dependent upon your ability to effectively prepare for and facilitate the process. Following are some suggestions to consider:

- **Welcome participants:** Make sure participants feel at ease as the process begins. It is always a good idea to have snacks and refreshments available.
- **Describe the overall process and goals in each BFK•Focus meeting:** Outline the process for participants. They will have been exposed to these elements in your preparatory staff meeting, but a quick reminder is a good idea. A simple way to expose participants to the process is to move them through the Introduction to BFK•Focus at the beginning of the online version of BFK•Focus.
- **Establish the time commitment:** Your teacher team should be able to complete BFK•Focus in three 90-minute meetings. Teams that have experience with BFK•Focus may be able to complete the process in less time.
- **Develop a meeting schedule:** You should plan about a week between BFK•Focus meetings. This timeframe will give participants the ability to consider the information they generated in the last meeting and to plan for what they will need to do at subsequent meetings.
- **Set expectations for each meeting:** Teachers should understand the purpose and intended outcomes for each BFK•Focus meeting before they arrive. The first few minutes of each meeting should be used to review where the team has been and preview the day's work to set expectations. The last few minutes of each meeting should be used to summarize meeting accomplishments and foreshadow what will be occurring at the next meeting. Make sure that everyone knows when and where the next meeting will occur.
- **Establish and maintain social norms:** For the most part, teachers have little experience in talking about student performance data and how it connects to their practice. Because of that they may be somewhat nervous or uncomfortable as they begin this process. It is important to acknowledge this point, but to move through this discomfort. BFK•Focus works when teachers are open about their data and the practices they use as they work with students.
- **Describe your role in the process:** As a facilitator, your job is to make sure the team accomplishes the meeting's goals. Your job is to enforce the social norms, ask questions, push for quality work, keep things moving and act as the scribe of the group.



## Facilitation Tips for Each Component

- **Introduction to BFK•Focus:** It is important to take your team through the Introduction to BFK•Focus component—especially if they have never experienced the process before. This introduction lays out the expectations associated with the process and sets the stage for the process that follows. If you are working with a team that has already been through the process, you can move rapidly through the Introduction to BFK•Focus. The process, as currently designed, requires one of the teachers on the team to enroll. The results of the process will be stored in that teacher’s “My Learn” file. Once a teacher on the team has enrolled in BFK•Focus, you should move right into the first page of the Introduction to BFK•Focus. At the bottom of this page, you will see the option to download a sample version of the “Focus Forward” document that will emerge from this process. Your team may want a sneak peak at the kind of document their efforts will produce.

Note: Any time you enter information into the online version of BFK•Focus, make sure you click the “Submit, I’m Done” button so that the team’s information will be stored in the system. All of this information will be displayed and used in subsequent pages of the process.

- **Level I: Data analysis—achievement and progress:** BFK•Focus was designed for teachers to enter their achievement and progress information into the system and then to assess their strengths and challenges related to this information. To speed up the process, you may want to enter all of this information into the system before your first meeting with teachers. This step will save about 15 to 20 minutes of time with the team. Make sure you focus your team’s attention on the suggested guidelines for choosing their areas of strength and challenge. In the end, the team will choose one area of strength and one area of challenge on which to focus additional attention.

Note: Make sure you focus your team’s attention on patterns in the data and not just discrete pieces of data. Patterns that arise across subject areas and/or grade levels hold the key for large-scale instructional improvement. By addressing one pattern, your team may be able to improve their results in multiple areas.

- **Level II: Root cause analysis:** You will support your team in completing two important tasks in Level II. First, you will help the team select an area of strength and an area of challenge as the focal point of their joint learning over the remainder of the school year. If there is a relationship between the area of strength and the area of challenge, then that is even better. If possible, nudge the team toward addressing patterns in the data as opposed to simple data strengths and deficits. There is more power in addressing patterns than in addressing discrete strengths or challenges.

The second and most difficult task in Level II is probing for the root causes of your team’s areas of strength and challenge. The key to successfully completing this activity is the appropriate usage of the two cause/effect “fishbones” that are provided in Level II. When your team selects factors from each of the fishbones, you must help them to narrow down the potential causes. The key is to ensure that the selected factor fits the selected area of strength or challenge. For example, if a team selects as its area of strength, “Strong growth with middle- and high-achieving students in math and reading,” then the team should use the fishbone to find those factors that help to account for strong growth with these two subgroups, but not with their low-achieving students. A factor that would tend to affect all students similarly would be discarded because it wouldn’t be able to account for the differences that are showing up in the data. In some cases, the team might need to edit some factors so that they are specific to the effect they are seeing in their data.

- **Level III: Improvement goal setting:** In Level III, your team will be producing a SMART goal and an action plan for its area of strength and its area of challenge. Teachers have typically had some experience with writing SMART goals, but even with this experience it is important that you encourage them to choose a goal that is important, specific and measurable. The key to this activity is the action plan. Make sure that teachers think through the steps they will need to take to accomplish their goal and that they have a plan for making this happen.

The other complication for Level III is that this version of BFK•Focus requires that the action planning be done separate from the process. Downloadable action planning templates are included in BFK•Focus, but to complete their action planning the “Focus Forward” document must be downloaded and the action planning steps filled in. Focus Forward is a Microsoft Word document so it should be no problem working from that document. At the end of the online analysis process, this document can be downloaded with an inventory of all of the work completed in BFK•Focus.

### Facilitation Checklist

#### **Before you begin the BFK•Focus process**

- Gather your student performance data.
- Preview the Focus Forward example document. You can download a PDF of a completed example on the first page of the online introduction.

#### **During the BFK•Focus process**

- Use the downloadable PDFs to explain gain patterns, big picture examples, etc.
- When determining specific factors that could be contributing to identified strengths or weaknesses in Level II, encourage your team to use the factors listed on the fishbone diagram. If the group decides to add more factors, they must be connected to the larger causation category and be something that can be controlled.
- As the team enters into the action planning portion of Level III, the PDF action plan templates can be printed out and used as worksheets. Once Level III is completed, and the “Focus Forward” document is downloaded, action plan steps can be added and edited before uploading the final version, where it will be saved.
- Congratulate your team and remind them that while producing a thoughtful data-based plan is an enormous accomplishment, it is only the first step in constructing a better future for your students. Meaningful and enduring change is an ongoing evolutionary process. To move forward, you need a plan, but you also need commitment, persistence and leadership. Your team and your facilitator should meet quarterly to follow up, carry out, measure and/or adjust the action plan.

### A Final Thought

Leadership is context-specific and experiential in nature. You can learn about leadership in the abstract, but in the end, people learn to lead by leading. Expect to learn a great deal about your leadership capacities in the course of the process. Good luck on this important journey!