# Initial Inquiry Overview and Purpose

This planning guide provides an overview of the Initial Inquiry stage of the Formal Review. The purpose of the Initial Inquiry stage is to collect data through engagement with stakeholders to better understand their experiences. This data, along with state-collected data, will be used to determine where there is sufficient evidence indicating a criterion is met, or whether additional information is needed via the Follow-Up Inquiry to address gaps or inconsistencies or elevate areas of strength.

Formal Review Process Timeline
1) Launch
2) Initial Inquiry
3) Follow-up Inquiry
4) Determination

# Step-by-Step Guide for the Initial Inquiry Stage

Step 1: [Technical Assistance (TA) Call](#_Step_1:_Technical) 3

Step 2: [Stakeholder Surveys](#_Step_2:_Stakeholder)

[Recruitment](#_Completing_the_Needs)

Step 3: [Coursework Observations](#_Step_3:_Coursework) (only applicable to SOs undergoing an early literacy-specific review)

Step 4: [Focus Group and Interview Days](#_Step_4:_Focus)

[Recruitment](#_Completing_the_Needs)

Welcome Meeting

[Exit](#_Completing_the_Needs) Meeting

[Review](#_Completing_the_Needs) Team

Appendix A: [Sample Recruitment Language](#_Appendix_A:_Recruitment)

Appendix B: [Sample Notification to Literacy Faculty](#_Appendix_B:_Sample)

Appendix C: [Tips for Survey and Focus Group Recruitment](#_Appendix_C:_Tips_1)

# Step 1: Technical Assistance Call 3

What happens during this step?

* DESE goes over what to expect during the Initial Inquiry stage and answers the SO’s questions. During the call, DESE:
  + Reviews how to fill in the Initial Inquiry Workbook
    - For SOs with Elementary, Early Childhood, Moderate Disabilities PK-2 and/or Moderate Disabilities PK-8 programs, DESE reviews the specific considerations for Early Literacy focus groups, interviews, and coursework observations.
  + Elevates key details from the items shared in advance:
    - Why are we talking to each of the SO’s stakeholder groups?
    - What are promising practices for recruiting for survey responses and focus group participation?
    - What can the SO adjust? What cannot be changed?
    - What are the expectations for the Welcome Meeting and Focus Group participation?

When does it happen?

* Month 9

Helpful Tips

* The SO should invite members of its team or personnel who will be directly managing logistics for the surveys, focus groups, and interview days.

Deliverables

Prior to TA Call 3, please complete the following:

* Read the documents and communication shared by the DESE specialist in advance of the call.
* Send list of SO personnel who will be joining the technical assistance call. This should include key members responsible for recruitment or logistics for the Stakeholder Surveys and Focus Group and Interview Days.

# Step 2: Stakeholder Surveys

What are they?

* SOs are responsible for recruiting participants to complete DESE-created surveys prior to the focus group and interview days. This information will help DESE and the review team understand how to tailor focus group and interview questions.

When does it happen?

* Month 9-12

Important Details

* SOs are responsible for recruiting stakeholders to complete the surveys. DESE will set minimum thresholds for survey participation based on the size of each stakeholder group to ensure there is a sufficient evidence base on which to make judgments through the review process.
* Suggested language for outreach is included in [Appendix A](bookmark://_Appendix_A:_Recruitment). While SOs may adapt this template, all initial outreach **must** include the highlighted language.
* SOs may not provide guidance to any stakeholder group beyond providing logistical information and a brief description of the purpose of the surveys. Any perception that the SO has unduly influenced survey responses may result in action by DESE.
* Helpful tips can be found in [Appendix C](#_Appendix_C:_Tips_1).

Deliverables

* Send survey invitations and reminders to all relevant stakeholders.
* Meet survey minimum thresholds for each stakeholder group (DESE will provide updates on completion numbers).

# Step 3: Coursework Observations (only applicable to SOs undergoing an early literacy-specific review)

What happens during this step?

* DESE Literacy Content Specialists complete observations of core literacy courses.

When does this step occur?

* Months 9-13

Important Details

* After reviewing the SO’s completed early literacy matrices and program(s) of study, DESE will determine which courses to observe to collect the most relevant evidence.
  + DESE will provide an overview of the observation process as well as the specific courses to be observed. DESE Literacy Content specialists will work with faculty to determine a schedule for the observations.
    - For each identified course for observation, DESE Literacy Content specialists will observe no more than two course sessions.
    - Course observations may happen before or after the Focus Group and Interview Days; the observation schedule will be collaboratively determined and depend on when courses are on offer.
* DESE Literacy Content Specialists will use an observation protocol grounded in the *Early Literacy Program Approval Criteria* to ensure consistency within and across organizations.
  + To support successful observations, the SO’s Early Literacy review designee should anticipate being available (via phone or email) to answer questions and support logistics for the scheduled observations.

Deliverables

* After TA Call 3, per the SO’s timeline, the SO will:
  + Complete and submit the Observation Schedule Template (shared during TA Call 3).
  + Notify early literacy faculty of upcoming observation(s) (see sample language in [Appendix B](#_Appendix_B:_Sample)).

# Step 4: Focus Group and Interview Days

What happens during this step?

* The DESE team hears directly from the SO’s stakeholders through virtual focus groups, interviews, and meetings with the SO team. A typical schedule includes:
  + Day 1: Welcome Meeting, focus groups, interviews
  + Days 2-3: Additional focus groups and interviews as needed

When does this step occur?

* Month 13

Important Details

* DESE provides a template schedule and overview for the Focus Group and Interview Days, which includes a list of all required stakeholder groups and instructions for adjusting the schedule to better align with the SO and its stakeholders’ needs.
* DESE sets minimum thresholds for focus group participation based on the size of each stakeholder group to ensure there is a sufficient evidence base on which to make judgments through the review process.
* DESE sends the final Focus Group and Interview Day schedule along with all Zoom links at least two weeks in advance of the Focus Group and Interview Days.
* Facilitators for each focus group and interview use a template to ensure consistency within and across organizations. This is tailored based on the evidence collected in the Launch stage, Stakeholder Surveys, and/or state-collected output data to support the reviewers to build on that evidence base.
* Questions asked are all directly related to the Program Approval Criteria, including, where applicable, the Early Literacy Program Approval Criteria.
* To support a successful visit, the SO’s review designee should anticipate being available (via phone or email) to answer questions and support logistics for the duration of focus groups and interviews.
* SOs may not provide guidance to any stakeholder group beyond providing logistical information and a brief description of the purpose of the focus groups and interviews. Any perception that the SO has unduly influenced participants’ responses may result in action by DESE.

Deliverables

**After TA Call 3, per the SO’s timeline, the SO will:**

* Complete and submit the Initial Inquiry Workbook
* Recruit focus group and interview participants (see details on next page).
* Provide proof of advertisement of focus groups and surveys to all stakeholders and those who have completed programs during the *previous three academic years* (years will be specific for individual SOs under review).
  + - Must include language highlighted in Appendix A.
    - Messages may directly CC the DESE specialist, be forwarded, or be provided as PDFs.
* Provide names and emails of anticipated focus group and interview participants with DESE in advance of the visit.

**After the Focus Group and Interview Days, the SO will:**

* Share Welcome Meeting presentation, including a digital copy of any visuals or resources shared during the meeting.

## Focus Group and Interview Recruitment Details

The SO is responsible for recruiting stakeholders to participate in focus groups and interviews during this step of the review. While DESE aims to collect a significant amount of evidence through surveys, hearing directly from stakeholders and asking follow-up questions in a live conversation is an invaluable component of the Formal Review process.

The SO may not provide guidance to any stakeholder group beyond logistical information and a brief description of the purpose of the focus groups and interviews. Any perception that the SO has unduly influenced focus group and interview participants may result in action by DESE.

Sponsoring Organization Personnel

* DESE will adjust the list below based on the responses provided in the Stakeholder Groups tab in the Launch Worksheet. If personnel are involved in more than one of the groups listed below, please inform the DESE specialist to make appropriate adjustments.
* Personnel in supervisory roles should not participate in a focus group that includes personnel whom they supervise.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Structure** | **Minimum Number of Participants** |
| **Leadership Interview:** School of education, department, and/or program leaders and decision-makers, including those who supervise other personnel and therefore cannot attend other focus groups | All |
| **Field-Based Experience Staff Interview:**  Field placement/coordinator(s) | All staff members who manage field placements for educator preparation programs. |
| **Program Supervisor Focus Group** | Set by DESE based on the total number of program supervisors and size of the SO’s programs.  For SOs with Elementary, Early Childhood, Moderate Disabilities PK-2, and Moderate Disabilities PK-8 programs, a minimum threshold for participation of supervising practitioners in these areas will also be determined based on the size of the programs. |
| **Part-Time Education Faculty Focus Group** | Set by DESE based on the total number of part-time education faculty and size of the SO’s programs. |
| **Full-Time Education Faculty Focus Group** | All full-time faculty members. If an extenuating circumstance prevents a full-time faculty member from participating live, please email the DESE specialist to provide a survey link, allowing for their asynchronous participation. |
| **Arts & Sciences Faculty Focus Group:**  Faculty from content areas who teach educator preparation candidates | Set by DESE based on the size and structure of the SO’s programs. |
| **Literacy Faculty Focus Group** Faculty responsible for delivering literacy content. | Set by DESE based on information provided in the Early Literacy Matrix and Program Overview. DESE will work with the SO to determine the best schedule and/or structure for this faculty group to collect the most relevant evidence. |
| **Advising Staff Interview:** Advisors or other support staff that work with educator preparation candidates | Key advising personnel representing all program groupings. |
| **Partner Focus Group:** PK-12 school/district partners, including principals, superintendents, and other district  personnel as relevant | As many as possible (minimum of six).  Helpful tip: Participating partners should be representative of schools/districts with high pre-practicum/practicum placement and employment rates. |
| **Supervising Practitioner Focus Group:** Supervising Practitioners representing all program groupings. | Set by DESE based on the size of the SO’s programs.   For SOs with Elementary, Early Childhood, Moderate Disabilities PK-2, and Moderate Disabilities PK-8 programs, a minimum threshold for participation of supervising practitioners in these areas will also be determined based on the size of the programs.  Helpful tip: Prioritize participation of supervising practitioners who have recently worked with candidates in the practicum (rather than host teachers from the pre-practicum only). |

Candidate/Completer Focus Groups

* Candidate/Completer Focus Groups will be organized by program grouping. All licensure programs within each program grouping must be represented in the focus group participants.
  + For SOs with Elementary, Early Childhood, Moderate Disabilities PK-2, and Moderate Disabilities PK-8 programs, there will be separate focus groups for those candidates and completers.
* DESE will set minimum thresholds for focus group participants for each program grouping based on its number of completers. Meeting this threshold ensures DESE collects sufficient evidence to inform decision-making in the review.

**Recruitment**

* The SO must advertise the opportunity to participate in focus groups to all currently enrolled candidates and anyone who was enrolled in or completed programs during the three years leading up to the review.
* The SO should prioritize recent completers and candidates who have experienced most of their program of study including some of their practicum, as these individuals can best speak to the focus group questions.
* Suggested language for outreach is included in [Appendix A](#_Appendix_A:_Recruitment). While the SO may adapt this template, **all initial outreach must include the highlighted language.**
* **For more helpful tips, please refer to** [**Appendix C**](#_Appendix_C:_Tips)**.**

## Welcome Meeting

The Welcome Meeting typically starts the first Focus Group and Interview Day. This gives the SO an opportunity to orient DESE and the review team to the SO’s educator preparation approach and highlight key elements of their programs for the reviewers. The structure of the virtual meeting can be determined by the SO. The SO may also choose to provide a pre-recorded presentation instead of a live Welcome Meeting. The meeting will not exceed one hour in length.

**Important Details**

* DESE will prepare a Zoom link in advance
* The host can be anyone of the SO’s choosing
* Suggested topics include:
  + How the SO is preparing culturally responsive & linguistically sustaining educators
  + How the SO ensures the use of evidence-based practices throughout programming
  + How the SO is addressing all the domain vision statements
  + Any additional contextual information the SO thinks the review team will need to understand the SO’s structure or work
* Reviewers will attend focus groups and interviews having reviewed the information provided by the SO in the Program Overview Worksheet and the Welcome Meeting, along with the evidence collected through Stakeholder Surveys.

## Review Team

Each Formal Review is facilitated by DESE specialists in close collaboration with an external review team comprised of representatives from both educator preparation programs and PK-12 schools and districts. Reviewers are carefully selected and trained to make evidence-based judgments in alignment with the 2023 Program Approval Criteria.

Role in Initial Inquiry

Prior to the Focus Group and Interview Days, DESE and the review team will review evidence from the Stakeholder Surveys and state-collected data. They will use this information to tailor focus group and interview questions. On the Focus Group and Interview Days, reviewers will attend the Welcome Meeting and co-facilitate focus groups and interviews. After the conclusion of the focus groups and interviews, DESE will compile the Initial Inquiry evidence for the review team. The review team will use this evidence to make recommendations for the Follow-Up Inquiry.

**Review Team Members**

During the TA Call 2, the SO will receive a list of the reviewers participating in their Formal Review, including their current title and organization.

# Appendix A: Sample Recruitment Language

To: All currently enrolled candidates and [***INSERT previous three academic years***] completers

Subject: Sign Up for an Important Focus Group to Share Feedback with the State

Dear \_\_\_\_,

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) works to guarantee that preparation in Massachusetts results in effective educators ready to support the success of all students. All educator preparation program providers must undergo periodic review by DESE to maintain the ability to endorse candidates for licensure in Massachusetts. [Sponsoring Organization’s] preparation programs are currently undergoing this important review.

During the next few months, DESE will lead surveys and focus groups for candidates, faculty and staff, PK-12 partners, program supervisors, and supervising practitioners to share feedback on their experiences with our educator preparation programs. Hearing from stakeholders is a critical part of DESE's review process and we encourage you to share about your experiences. All current candidates, recent completers, PK-12 partners, supervising practitioners, program supervisors, and faculty are invited to participate. You can choose to participate in both surveys and focus groups.

**Surveys**

Please note that DESE hopes to engage as many stakeholders as possible in the survey to learn about your organization. This will help DESE prepare for discussions and dig deeper into your experiences during live discussions. Please complete this survey [add link] **between now and [ENTER DATE].**

**Focus Groups**

On the afternoon/evening of [**ENTER focus group dates**], DESE will conduct virtual focus groups. Many of DESE’s former focus group participants have signaled these discussions are interesting and a valuable use of their time. We hope you will feel the same.

**If you are interested in joining a focus group, please [fill out this brief survey, email the designee etc.] to sign up by [date]. We will send a reminder in advance, but you may access the focus group using this Zoom link: [Add link}**

For more information about the review of preparation providers in the Commonwealth please visit: https://www.doe.mass.edu/edprep/review/. If you have any questions, please contact [review designee name] at [contact information].

Thank you,

[Sender’s name]

# Appendix B: Sample Language for Notifying Early Literacy Faculty

To: All part-time and full-time faculty of courses in which early literacy content is covered

Subject: State Observations of Literacy Coursework

Dear \_\_\_\_,

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) works to guarantee that preparation in Massachusetts results in effective educators ready to support the success of all students. All educator preparation program providers must undergo periodic review by DESE to maintain the ability to endorse candidates for licensure in Massachusetts. Elementary, Early Childhood, Moderate Disabilities PK-2, and Moderate Disabilities PK-8 licensure programs must also undergo an early literacy-specific review by DESE to ensure that teacher candidates in these are prepared, through coursework and opportunities for practice and high-quality feedback, in evidence-based early literacy as outlined in the Mass Literacy Guide. [Sponsoring Organization’s] preparation programs are currently undergoing this important review.

As part of this review process, DESE will be conducting an on-site observation of your course, [Insert Course Title]. These coursework observations will be conducted by a DESE Literacy Content Specialist who will use an observation protocol grounded in the *Early Literacy Program Approval Criteria*.

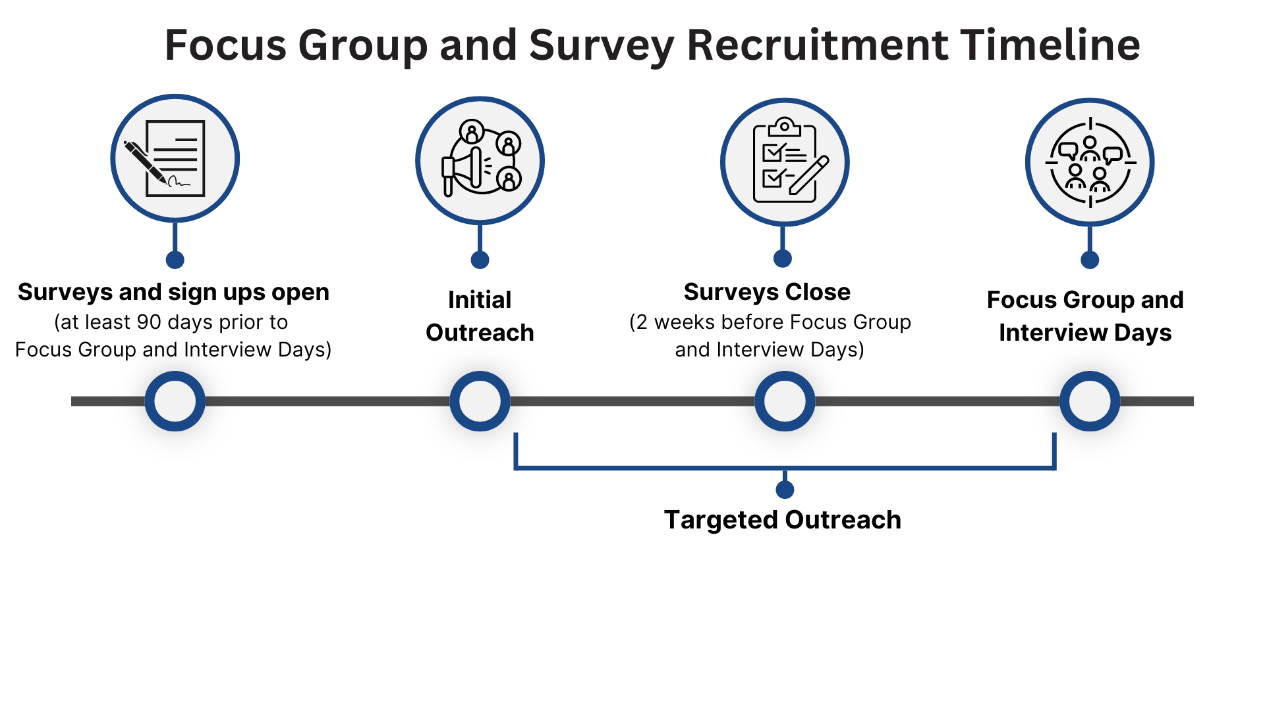
Please contact [literacy-specific review designee name] at [contact information] to collaboratively determine the schedule for these observations.

Thank you,

[Sender’s name]

# Appendix C: Tips for Survey and Focus Group Recruitment

During the Initial Inquiry Stage of the Formal Review process, sponsoring organizations (SOs) are responsible for recruiting stakeholders to complete surveys and sign up for focus groups and interviews. Throughout the review, the external review team and DESE take plans for improvement and organizational inputs into consideration but **weigh evidence of impact most heavily**. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews provide DESE with evidence of impact from the stakeholders most impacted by the SO’s work. As such, effective recruitment for surveys, focus groups, and interviews, is essential for facilitating a thorough review.



## **Tips for Initial Outreach (at least 90 days before Focus Group and Interview Days)**

* **Include important information in the outreach**
  + Give a brief explanation about the purpose of surveys and focus groups within the SO’s Formal Review.
  + Explain the importance of the SO's relationship with DESE in continuing to endorse candidates for licensure.
  + Assure respondents that responses are anonymous (to the greatest extent possible).
  + Email structure
    - Ensure email subject lines are compelling and the text of the email clearly indicates why stakeholders should make time to participate in the surveys and focus groups.
    - Send one longer email with all the information and then shorter emails with follow-up links in every email.
* **Reach out early and often**
  + Start outreach as early as possible.
  + Send multiple reminders.
  + Include survey close dates and convey urgency as survey close dates are approaching.
* **Utilize multiple means of communication**
  + Ask faculty members to help spread the word.
    - Ask faculty members to spend one minute at the start or end of class reiterating the importance of these opportunities, where to find more information, and the deadlines to participate.
    - Post a banner/announcement on your Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as Canvas or Blackboard, with the link to sign up.
  + Consider sending out a flyer, email, or social media post that provides a heads up to your stakeholders that these surveys and focus groups will be happening soon.
    - View a [sample Instagram post](https://www.canva.com/design/DAGgCf-I76o/20f1tbNYXWOMW8z4_Q2vKg/view?utm_content=DAGgCf-I76o&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink&mode=preview) that informs stakeholders about the upcoming DESE opportunities.
* **Consider incentives for participation**
  + SOs can consider incentives, such as a raffle or offer food, for participation for stakeholder surveys, interviews, and focus groups.
    - The SO may not provide guidance to any stakeholder group beyond logistical information and a brief description of the purpose of the focus groups and interviews. Any perception that the SO has unduly influenced focus group and interview participants may result in action by DESE.

## **Tips for Targeted Outreach (about every 2 weeks until Focus Group and Interview Days)**

Every few weeks, the DESE specialist will reach out to the SO designee to provide updates on survey completion and signups for focus groups and interviews. This information will be helpful for SOs to provide targeted outreach to specific audiences.

* **Send personalized emails/messages to targeted stakeholder groups** 
  + If a specific stakeholder group has low numbers, then the SO might consider reaching out to the faculty members that work closely with those stakeholders to send additional reminders.
* **Share participant numbers with stakeholders** 
  + Share DESE minimums and response numbers with stakeholders to raise awareness of the current status and need for additional participants.