Synthesizing Visioning Feedback

Identifying Common Themes in Community Feedback Across Stakeholder Groups

**Why This Step is Important:** Once the planning team has conducted an inclusive visioning process within the community (as described in the PfS resource “Envisioning the Future”), the team’s next step is analyzing this feedback in order to identify common themes as well as key outliers across stakeholder groups. The process of identifying these common themes—of distilling the vast array of community feedback to a concise and comprehensible form—is critical to both the success and the credibility of the planning process. This messy and complex synthesis work, designed to honor and highlight the voices of the community, is a valuable service provided by the planning team. Sharing these common themes back to the community, and explaining that these themes voiced by the community will inform the development of the plan’s strategic objectives and initiatives, supports the community’s sense of ownership for both the process and the resulting plan.

**The Process for Identifying Common Themes:** If the district or school has conducted visioning sessions with multiple stakeholder groups across the community, the planning team is responsible for synthesizing this feedback in order to identify common cross-cutting themes as well as meaningful outliers. Identifying common themes in the feedback generated by the planning process is the first step in identifying strategic objectives for the district plan. The planning team can then explore connections between these themes and the results of the root cause analysis of the current context in order to further develop and refine strategic objectives and initiatives.

The process for synthesizing community feedback will vary depending on the particular planning process, planning team structure, and amount of visioning feedback. To conduct the synthesis, facilitators will want to organize the planning team into small mixed stakeholder groups, with each group responsible for synthesizing different elements of community feedback. Two different approaches for organizing this small group work are described below: one approach is based on assigning each group a different protocol question and the other is based on assigning each group a different set of community responses to all protocol questions. Depending on the amount of community feedback gathered and the size of the planning team, this process may require two rounds of synthesis work in order to identify common themes across all responses and achieve planning team consensus about them.

The Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheet included with this resource is a useful tool for planning team members to use as they structure and record their group synthesis work. This worksheet guides members through a synthesizing process in which they first identify categories of responses across stakeholder feedback and then describe the common theme for each category in detail, documenting the theme as either a bulleted list or descriptive statement.

These two different approaches to synthesizing community visioning feedback are described below.

1. Organize planning team members into small mixed groups of 4 to 6 participants, each of which includes representatives from different stakeholder groups. Give each group the set of visioning feedback assigned to them to review and synthesize, as well as copies of the Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheet they can use to record the results of their work. Since team members will be doing detailed, intensive, text-based work, it is helpful to provide each member with their own hard copy of the visioning feedback assigned to that group as well as materials such as highlighters or stickie notes.

The time required for the synthesis of visioning feedback can range from 1.5 to 3.5 hours or more, depending on the amount of visioning data gathered, the synthesis approach selected, and the pace at which each small group works. It is helpful to the planning process if final synthesis results are shared back to the community after synthesis is completed, so that community members are aware of the way in which their voices contributed to the planning process and what the community as a whole had to say.

1. *Facilitators might choose to assign each small group one protocol question only (if using a multi-question visioning protocol), and ask each group to identify common themes across all feedback for that question in one round of synthesis*, if this approach is appropriate given the size of the team and amount of feedback. For example, if the district is using the Back to the Future Protocol, Group 1 could identify common themes for protocol question 1 by reviewing all visioning feedback for question 1 from all stakeholder groups. Group 2 could identify common themes for question 2 by reviewing all visioning feedback for question 2 from all stakeholder groups, and so on.

The advantage of this approach is that each group emerges with a final list of common themes for that one question after one round of synthesis. This approach may not be feasible if a large amount of community feedback was gathered, however, and it may not be workable or engaging for planning team members if small groups become so large that it is difficult for members to actively participate. In addition, with this approach, team members do not have first-hand experience with the responses to all visioning questions and miss the opportunity to learn from the full range of community feedback.

1. *Facilitators might choose to assign each small group all protocol questions (if using a multi-question visioning protocol) for a subset of stakeholder feedback, creating multiple syntheses for each question across the planning team. Facilitators would then conduct a second round of synthesis in which each small group is tasked with synthesizing the results from this first round of synthesis for one question, in a jigsaw approach.* If the community visioning process has been robust and the planning team is of a larger size, this approach will allow more intensive focus on stakeholder feedback and more hands-on, active engagement and learning by planning team members.

For the first round of synthesis, facilitators would assign a different set of stakeholder feedback to each small group, and ask each group to identify common themes for all protocol questions in these responses. For example, Group 1 might be assigned feedback from families and community partners, and could identify common themes in the responses of these stakeholders to all protocol questions. Group 2 might be assigned feedback from students and staff at two or three schools, and could identify common themes for all questions in these stakeholders’ feedback, and so on. The advantage of this approach is that feedback from each stakeholder group is given appropriate attention and focus, and planning team groups may remain small and engaged. This first round of synthesis results in multiple lists of common themes for each question. The planning team must then engage in another round of synthesis in order to jigsaw these lists and create one master set of common themes for each question.

During the second round of synthesis, facilitators might reorganize the planning team into small groups by protocol question. Each small group would create the master list of common themes for their assigned question through a jigsaw approach, using all copies of the Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheet completed for that question during round one. For example, Group 1 will receive all of the Common Themes Worksheets completed for question 1 in the first round of synthesis by all small groups, and will jigsaw these lists of common themes to create the master list of common themes for this question. Group 1 will document this final list of themes on a new Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheet. At this point, this master list of common themes represents the visioning feedback gathered for this question from all stakeholder groups in the visioning process. Group 2 will identify common themes for question 2 in a similar fashion, and so on.

**Note to Facilitators:** If the district or school is conducting visioning using the Back to the Future Protocol (<http://www.nsrfharmony.org/system/files/protocols/future.pdf> and <http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/future.pdf>), you will find that the common themes identified for all three of the protocol’s questions can serve as useful starting points in developing strategic objectives and initiatives. Themes identified for Back to the Future’s first two questions, about the future and present state, can serve as useful starting points in identifying strategic objectives, the “what” and the “why” of the plan. Themes identified for the protocol’s third question, about actions that helped the district or school to move from the present to future state, can serve as a useful starting point in identifying strategic initiatives, the “how” of the plan.

As teams engage in the challenging and often messy work of synthesizing community feedback, it is helpful to remind participants that planning is an iterative process, and that the common themes they are identifying will continue to evolve during the planning process. These themes will evolve as the team reviews them for connections to the district’s or school’s analysis of the current context and takes the next step of identifying strategic objectives and initiatives. The *Planning for Success* process includes a structured quality review of the draft plan as a final step in the process, which offers an additional opportunity for review and revision. In addition, the structure of the planning process itself may offer ongoing opportunities for review and revision. For example, if the process is structured so that the leadership team and planning team are both actively engaged in and sharing the planning process, these teams may then serve as reviewers of one another’s work.

**Text for Facilitator Presentation Slides:** Some suggested text for presentation slides about synthesizing community feedback to identify common themes is included below.

**Slide 1: Synthesizing Community Feedback**

* Organize into small groups
  + [list the specific assignment for each small group]
* Identify a facilitator and recorder
* Review community visioning feedback assigned to your group
* Identify common themes
  + Categories + descriptive statements or bulleted lists
* Complete the Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheet
  + One worksheet/question
* Prepare to present your group’s work to the team

**Slide 2: Identifying Common Themes**

1. Identify and record categories of responses for each question, across all feedback
   * Examples: Instruction; School Climate; Facilities
   * “Other” may be a category for meaningful outliers
2. Write a detailed description for each category
   * Create a descriptive statement, leading with a verb, or
   * Provide detail as a bulleted list, if preferred
3. Complete the Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheet for each assigned question
   1. Categories for each question should be determined by responses to that question
   2. Categories do not need to match across questions

**Slide 3: Group Presentations** *(if appropriate)*

**Slide 4: Integrating Lists: Common Themes Jigsaw** *(if necessary)*

* Organize into [X] small groups
  + [list the specific assignment for each small group]
* Identify a facilitator and recorder
* Review all common themes previously generated for assigned question
  + Work from Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheets, Round 1
* Create a master list of common themes for assigned question
  + Complete new Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheet, Round 2
* Prepare to present your group’s work to the team

**Slide 5: Group Presentations**

# Community Feedback: Common Themes Worksheet

*Purpose:* This worksheet is designed for planning team use as members synthesize visioning feedback. Complete one worksheet for each visioning question. Begin by identifying categories across all stakeholder responses for that question. Then write a descriptive statement or bulleted list for each category that reflects the meaning of a majority of responses in that category. Use “Other” as a category to record meaningful outliers.

Envisioning Question: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

| **Categories** | **Common Theme**  *A descriptive statement that can stand alone or a bulleted list, if preferred.* |
| --- | --- |
| *Example: Curriculum* | *Example:**Curriculum reflects student voice and includes interdisciplinary projects and authentic learning experiences both inside and outside the school building.* |
| **1.** |  |
| **2.** |  |
| **3.** |  |
| **4.** |  |
| **5.** |  |
| **6.** |  |