

Community Engagement: A Key Ingredient for Public Schools Gaining Stakeholders' Input and Support

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Abstract

The community engagement process means that board members and administrators periodically seek information and ideas from citizens in order for them to have meaningful input for decision-making. The community engagement process stresses obtaining input from a diverse representation of stakeholders on key issues related to district personnel delivering the highest possible quality education to each child. A desired outcome of the community engagement process is creating a sense of “oneness” between the local public schools and the community members. It is critical the board make it clear at the outset of the community engagement process that it is the governing body for the district and the entity that approves and makes decisions. It is equally important that the citizens understand the importance of their input to the board and administrators regarding their perceptions of what needs to be done to maximize learning for each child in the community. The effective implementation of the community engagement process will result in the board having the best information possible for its decision-making and the community stakeholders having their input seriously considered by the board for enhancing the educational opportunities of the community’s children.

Keywords: community engagement process, school board members, citizens’ input, school improvement, children’s education

No form of democratic government permissible under our social contracts is likely to serve an apathetic people well over an extended period of time. Any of the myriad forms for managing schools can function reasonably well so long as substantial numbers of interested and responsible citizens are willing to inform themselves and engage in the task of making them work. (James, 1982, p. 17)

Participation in activities, discussions, and decisions that are important to citizens' interests pertaining to local governmental units such as school districts are perceived as inalienable rights in our democratic society. Social and psychological research has demonstrated that such participation is necessary for optimal functioning of local school districts. Citizens that perceive they have input into the decision-making process that affects their lives—and those of the community's children—are more likely to actively and fully participate in the support of the local school districts' goals and efforts. This perceived ownership is critical for community stakeholders' buy-in. Such participation creates a sense of responsibility in the citizens to help effectuate the school district's goals driven by maximizing learning for each student (Maehr, Hartman, & Bartz, 1984).

Citizens perceiving they have input and influence on the processes in which they have a decided self-interest positively affects their commitment to the decisions and supportive behaviors needed to actualize the school district's goals. The basic principle is:

Participation opportunities through input to the board's decision-making process to establish goals → **Commitment** to the board's decisions and goals → **Supportive behavior** to accomplish the board's goals (Maehr, Hartman, & Bartz, 1984)

The Community Engagement Process

Our experience—engaging hundreds of school districts, with tens of thousands of stakeholders—continues to suggest that in fact the most important role that a board member can play, is that of champion and steward of community engagement. (Lamb, 2014, p. 1)

School districts in the United States are at the frontline of local control. They are governed in most situations by board members elected by local citizens. Local control works best when a school district's citizenry has a sincere interest in the schools, provides meaningful input, and is motivated to help make the schools “the best they can be.” Undoubtedly, local control needs to be alive and well at the local school district level because local government is far more effective than state and federal government. The community engagement process is key to maximizing the positive attributes of local control at the school district level.

The community engagement process means that a public school district's board members and administrators periodically exchange information and ideas with citizens in order for the district to have meaningful input from a diverse community stakeholders' base. It means that a school district is seeking input pertaining to how community members view key issues related to the district staff delivering the highest possible quality education to each child in the community. The community engagement process focuses on the district board members and staff gaining information from stakeholders to improve its performance and create a sense of “oneness”

between the local public schools—as an entity—and the community members.

The board of education is the governing body for the local school district and is the entity that approves and makes decisions for the district. It is important when entering into the process to solicit input through community engagement that the citizenry clearly understand the role and function of the board of education. Equally important is that the citizenry understand the importance of their input to the board members and administrators regarding their perceptions on the happenings in the schools and their ideas for prompting the schools to better serve children (Illinois School Board Association, 2015).

The community engagement process is not a “one shot” activity to solicit community input, but rather an extremely well-planned pursuit through a number of avenues for collecting citizenry input. This includes sources such as social media, focus groups, surveys, public hearings or input sessions, meeting individually with various community groups, and even providing a venue for citizenry to provide input to board members and administrators one-to-one.

Community engagement strives to keep the “public” in public schools (Rice & Bartz, 2017). The community engagement process begins with the board framing questions to be answered with the help of citizens’ input. Effective implementation of the community engagement process will solicit citizens’ input to these questions as well as information that prompts the board members and administrators to identify other relevant needs.

Often a survey instrument is constructed and used as a starting point to solicit input for the community involvement process. It should be noted that a survey is a starting point—not an ending point. Surveys can be conducted online, via telephone, at parent-teacher conferences, or through the U.S. mail. Online surveys are very popular, but often do not meet the standards of being scientifically based. This means that the results can be skewed in favor of only those responding, therefore the results cannot be inferred to all of the district’s citizens. Up-to-date research techniques for telephone surveys (including cell phones) give a better sample for having confidence regarding inferring the results to the general perceptions of all citizens. This informational data is critical for helping gain a snapshot of the community.

It is extremely important that board members and administrators involved in the community engagement process understand that the focal point is *gaining input* from stakeholders, and not defending what school personnel are doing (or have done) by debating with stakeholders regarding differing opinions. The individuals involved for the school district in the community engagement process need to be *excellent listeners*. They must always strive, regardless of the forum for soliciting input, to put the citizenry at ease and demonstrate their sincerity in the process and the high value they place on the citizens’ involvement. This includes the board publicly—including through the media—communicating the importance of input through the community engagement process and its commitment to allocating the resources to make it work effectively (Reform Support Network, 2014).

It is crucial for board members and school staff participating in the community engagement process to understand the difference between community engagement and public relations. Public relations usually represents one-way communications from school personnel and the board to the stakeholders, with the intent of providing information in the best possible context to gain support from the citizens. Public relations stresses on placing the activities, accomplishments, and efforts of the school district and its personnel in the most favorable light. An effective public relations program is important to the school district, but it is crucial that board members and school administrators understand how its intent and function differs from community engagement. Again, community engagement strives to gain input from citizens to

obtain insights for improvement (Illinois School Board Association, 2015).

A particular application of the community engagement process is often integrated into a district's strategic planning process. Engaging the community stakeholders in strategic planning is a logical and natural process and will result in support for the implementation of the strategic plan's action steps. An initial step in strategic planning is the SWOT (Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis of the present situation regarding the district's efforts and accomplishments. A SWOT analysis helps determine where the board stands and where it sees itself going in the future. This is an example of a critical time the community engagement process can be used for citizens' input (Clark, 2017).

A goal of community engagement is to forge a partnership between the citizenry and school district. Community engagement strives to create a joint ownership of goals that include input from community members and a sense of responsibility for accomplishing these goals. In reality, maximizing student learning for each child in the district is a shared responsibility between community members and the school board/school staff.

To obtain a broad array of citizens' input from a variety of groups, board members must be willing to go out and engage in dialogue with citizens at their locations or on "their turf." This communication is critical for the success of any organization. This may necessitate board members and district personnel to get outside of their "comfort zones." Kracke (2006) strongly believes in board members and administrators going out into the community to solicit input where people: (a) worship, (b) study, (c) socialize, (d) work, (e) talk politics, and (f) participate in community service. She also encourages the board to reach out to community leaders to help solicit citizens to participate in the community engagement process. This reaching out to citizen groups at their locations will be a good experience for board members and administrators and should broaden their understanding and context of citizens' input.

The Community Engagement Needs Assessment Instrument

A Community Engagement Needs Assessment Instrument that contains criteria gleaned from a broad base of research on the community engagement process and state-of-the-art practices was developed by Dr. Bartz and Dr. Rice (See Appendix). It includes insights from 50 years of experience with community engagement from one author, and the expertise of another author who is a full-time staff member of a state school board association. In this role with the association he has experience in planning for the community engagement process and implementing it in a variety of districts—rural and urban, homogeneous and diversified demographics, and a variety of district enrollments. The expertise of the third author represents five years of experience as a superintendent and nine years as a principal at the frontline of utilizing the community engagement process. As presented, the Community Engagement Needs Assessment Instrument uses the district as the reference point. With minimal rewording, it can be modified to use with a specific school.

Concluding Thoughts

School districts in the United States are at the frontline of local control. They are governed in most situations by board members elected by local citizens. Local control works best when a school district's citizenry has a sincere interest in the schools, provides meaningful

input, and is motivated to help make the schools “the best they can be.” The community engagement process provides a venue for meaningful citizenry input to the board for consideration in its decision-making deliberations. Effective implementation of the community engagement process also creates a sense of “oneness” between the board and citizenry. The bottom line is that the effective implementation of the community engagement process will improve education for the community’s children.

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Appendix

Community Engagement Needs Assessment

Directions: Please rate your district by circling your response to each item. If an item does not apply, do not respond to it.

Rating Scale: Strongly Disagree (1) Disagree (2) Undecided (3) Agree (4) Strongly Agree (5)

Items	Your Rating				
1. The purpose of the community engagement process is clearly stated and broadly made known to citizens throughout the district.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The community engagement process reflects board members listening to all voices in the community, not just the most vocal and well known.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Community engagement activities stress the board's desire to understand the community's aspirations for the education of the children in the district.	1	2	3	4	5
4. The activities for community members and groups to have input through the community engagement process respect their time availability and are conducted in an efficient manner.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The results flowing from the input received through the community engagement process are effectively used by the board for guidance in its decision-making.	1	2	3	4	5
6. The community engagement process activities are authentic and respectful of the individual citizens and groups providing input.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The community engagement process includes a sufficient number of activities for which the board and its representatives physically "go out" into the community to seek input, and not just figuratively reach out for input.	1	2	3	4	5
8. The community engagement process reflects a high priority and sincere time commitment by board members and their representatives.	1	2	3	4	5
9. The community engagement process reflects board members and their representatives as being excellent listeners.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The board uses information gleaned from the community engagement process for the betterment of the children's education.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Proper resources are allocated to the community engagement process in order for it to be successful.	1	2	3	4	5
12. The community engagement process is ongoing.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Information is disseminated to the public and media regarding how the board uses the input collected through the community engagement process.	1	2	3	4	5
14. The community engagement process reaches out to all district citizens and groups and is not limited to those with whom board members are likely to agree.	1	2	3	4	5
15. The community engagement process utilizes effective face-to-face interactions for receiving input.	1	2	3	4	5
16. The community engagement process effectively utilizes social media and other forms of technology to solicit input from the citizenry.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix (Continued)

Community Engagement Needs Assessment

Directions: Please rate your district by circling your response to each item. If an item does not apply, do not respond to it.

Rating Scale: Strongly Disagree (1) Disagree (2) Undecided (3) Agree (4) Strongly Agree (5)

Items	Your Rating				
17. The community engagement process is fair and equitable regarding reaching out and considering input from special interest groups.	1	2	3	4	5
18. The community engagement process strives to create a “oneness” and sense of ownership on the part of the board and citizens.	1	2	3	4	5
19. School board members and their representatives involved in the community engagement process perform effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
20. The community engagement process creates positive and ongoing relationships between the board and citizens.	1	2	3	4	5
21. The voices of students are sought out for input through the community engagement process.	1	2	3	4	5
22. The board is truly committed to the concept of a “promise to the public” to use the input in its decision-making process for the betterment of the district’s children.	1	2	3	4	5
23. The board’s mission, vision, and policies are inclusive of the community engagement process and the “promise to the public” concept.	1	2	3	4	5
24. The community engagement process effectively communicates the importance of local control of schools and the board’s commitment and actions to it.	1	2	3	4	5
25. Input sought by the community engagement process through “in person” face-to-face interactions create an open, inviting, and friendly atmosphere.	1	2	3	4	5
26. School board members and their representatives involved in the community engagement process are well trained.	1	2	3	4	5
27. Individual citizens and groups provide input in a constructive manner.	1	2	3	4	5
28. The board and its representatives work with the media to maximize the effectiveness of the community engagement process.	1	2	3	4	5
29. The board has established procedures for considering input from the community engagement process and uses them effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
30. Overall, the community engagement process has been successful.	1	2	3	4	5

Developed By: Dr. David E. Bartz, Eastern Illinois University and Dr. Patrick Rice, Illinois Association of School Board.