

Connecting *with the* Community

The Purpose and Process of
Community Engagement as Part of
Effective School Board Governance



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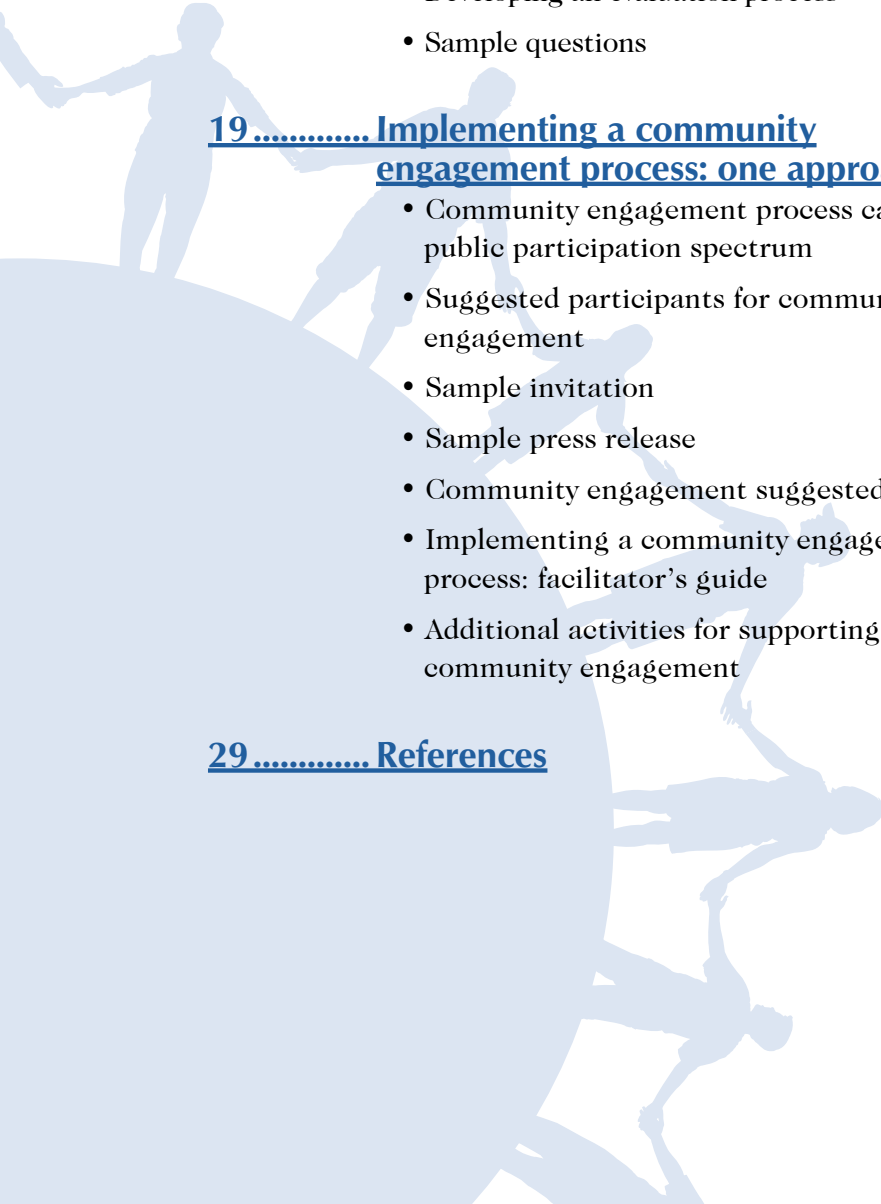
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PREFACE ■

Public education and boards of education in the United States are under attack.

State and federal education agencies are demanding more of local schools. The stakes in student performance on mandated testing are rising. State lawmakers and Congress are putting strings on education funding as an incentive to change, with special emphasis on charter schools. Corporations, and their privately-funded think tanks and philanthropic organizations, are crusading for “education reforms.” And local communities, whose taxpayers are straining under tightening household budgets and higher property taxes, are questioning the return on investment for their education tax dollars.

School board members who are elected to represent these communities know that meeting ever-increasing demands for accountability and teacher quality with less (or promised but not realized) funding is a difficult job. But many board members and the general public may not understand how these attacks threaten the very existence of public education and local school governance.

These assaults are not new. Ever since 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* was released by President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education, people have been wringing their hands and wondering how it all went wrong with public schools. Why aren’t our children learning? Why are U.S. students not keeping up on international tests? How can we fix this? Why can’t we fix this faster?

The blame has been falling on local educators and school boards and the weight of negative public perception is compounding the effect.

A Nation at Risk pointed to an erosion of curriculum content, especially at the high school level. However, as Diane Ravitch in her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010) points out, nowhere did the report criticize the governance or organization of public school districts. Boards were not yet seen as causes of low performance.

An historian of education, educational policy analyst and research professor, Ravitch has been actively involved in education issues since 1975, and served as a U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education during the George H.W. Bush administration. While originally a backer of many school reform efforts including charters, vouchers, and high stakes testing, Ravitch boldly changed her stance in 2009 — a move that led her to write her 2010 book on U.S. education.

Others are joining the chorus in their criticism of questionable education reform efforts, such as charters, vouchers, high stakes testing, and tying teacher evaluations. In evaluating some of the statistical studies that seek to compare the performance of charter and public schools, recent investigations conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University reveal that students’ test scores may prove that public schools are now outperforming charter schools. The Stanford analysts compared reading and math state-

based standardized test scores between charter school and public school students in 15 states, as well as scores in the District of Columbia. Experts found that 37 percent of charter schools posted improvements in math scores; however, these improvement rates were significantly below the improvement rates of students in public school classrooms. Furthermore, 46 percent of charter schools experienced math improvements that were “statistically indistinguishable” from the average improvement rates shown by public school students.

The public is also growing weary of attempts to apply student performance and test scores to school or teacher success. The annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll conducted in 2015 concluded that most Americans believe that test scores should not be used to evaluate teachers. In that poll, 55 percent of Americans and 61 percent of public school parents oppose including student scores on standardized tests as part of teacher evaluations.

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Yet the blame game continues. Lack of consistent curriculum and standards are blamed for low student achievement. Ineffective teachers are blamed for low student achievement. School size and district configuration are blamed for being too small or too large (depending on the source) to foster high student achievement. Parents are blamed for not being involved at home or at school. And now, significantly, school boards are blamed for wasteful, ineffective leadership that allegedly leads to underachievement in the classroom.

Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and another leading education reformer now at odds with his friend and colleague Ravitch, has called local schools boards “an anachronism and an outrage” and a “dysfunctional arrangement” that has skewed education priorities. His attack on school boards bluntly asked in a 2011 blog posting: “[W]ould public education come closer to serving the country’s needs ... if it were run by visionary reform-driven leaders rather than by cautious, community-based fiduciaries?” More recently, Finn asserted in an op-ed column published in *The Wall Street Journal* (September 5, 2016): “Local control as we’ve known it is growing obsolete. Let’s hail the kind of local control that charter schools embody.”

So what are the *real* ramifications of the loss of local control?

Abandoning or diminishing locally elected school boards would signal a fundamental change in one of the foundational components

of democracy in the United States. Decisions at the state and national level to turn over public education to reform-driven think tanks and corporate-funded philanthropists beg for a serious debate on the future of school governance.

Locally elected school boards and the administrators and staff in their districts want to do the best by all students. But all across the country, a succession of school reform efforts by outside forces have been imposed on local school boards and districts, all requiring the use of significant local resources. Although some of these reform efforts resulted in student achievement gains, many were later followed by student achievement losses. Among them, Ravitch cites:

- In San Diego, after 15 principals were demoted with no notice and a Balanced Literacy program instituted, resentment began to brew because leadership had not consulted teachers or parents when new plans were formed, also causing open dissension on the school board.
- Mayoral control in New York City promised more parental involvement, but new structures actually reduced those opportunities as local community education councils were rarely consulted.

Note that both of the reforms cited above led to *less*, not more, input from the local community and *less*, not more, student achievement.

“I was increasingly disturbed by the lack of any public forum to question executive decisions and by the elimination of all checks and balances on executive power. ... under this new system, the public had been left out of public education,” Ravitch said in her 2010 book. “Public education is a vital institution in our democratic society, and its governance must be democratic, open to public discussion, and public participation.”

Disregard for local governance is especially prevalent among larger charter school systems, according to a 2014 report, “Public Accountability for Charter Schools”:

- “Pennsylvania’s charter schools routinely ignore the state’s Right to Know Law, despite being legally bound to comply with it. In May 2013, the director of the state’s Office of Open Records testified that her office had received 239 appeals in cases where charter schools either rejected or failed to answer requests from the public for information on budgets, payrolls, or student rosters. Research by the mayor of Philadelphia’s

“Public education is a vital institution in our democratic society, and its governance must be democratic, open to public discussion and public participation.” – Diane Ravitch

Office of Education found that only about half of the city’s charter schools posted minutes from their board meetings on the school’s website.”

- “In Ohio, dozens of charter school boards turn about 96 percent of their taxpayer funding over to White Hat Management Company, a for-profit EMO. White Hat takes in more than \$60 million in public funding annually for its charter school management services, yet has refused to comply with requests from the governing boards of its own schools for detailed financial reports. Despite two Ohio court rulings compelling White Hat to release the requested documents, the company has refused.”
- “Until recently, schools in Chicago’s Noble Charter Network charged fines for student infractions of the school’s rules. The fines ranged from \$5 for chewing gum or failing to tuck in a shirt to \$280 for misbehavior in the classroom. According to the Chicago Tribune, Noble’s fees from such fines amounted to \$200,000 in revenues in 2011 alone. After significant protests by youth and parent organizing groups in Chicago, Noble stopped the practice in 2014.”

Once some of the reforms spawned by *A Nation at Risk* began to fizzle, a new wave of intrusion into public education began from private foundations with significant financial backing. The Annenberg Foundation was one of the first to begin funding reform movements through grants. Those efforts were

quickly followed by big names like the Lilly Endowment, the Packard Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Broad Foundation.

Early funders were willing to look at proposals from educators seeking to improve the system. But that gave way to the foundations themselves deciding what they wanted to accomplish and how, and then determining which school system would receive their money. And they expected measurable results.

“There is something fundamentally undemocratic about relinquishing control of the public education policy agenda to private foundations run by society’s wealthiest people,” Ravitch said. “When the wealthiest of these foundations are joined in common purpose, they represent an unusually powerful force that is beyond the reach of democratic institutions.” And if voters don’t like the foundation’s reform agenda, they can’t vote them out of office, she added, and the stakes grow even higher.

Ravitch wrote of the “abyss” that looms for public schools — an abyss created by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandating that 100 percent of students will meet or exceed educational standards as determined by a single high stakes test. Since this report on community engagement was initially published in 2013, NCLB has been replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). And while it relieved schools of the pressure to meet unrealistic goals under the threat of federal penalties, ESSA gives more flexibility but no less responsibility for reaching student performance goals. When

those goals are not met and the results are used to compare school vs. school, and district vs. district, education reformers turn to familiar arguments, insisting that schools should be run more like a business and that one success can be replicated in any setting.

Taking back control ■

Efforts to take back and retain local control must come from local efforts, not only through frank discussions about what communities expect from their schools but what they are willing to support to meet those expectations. Who better to connect with the community over local issues of education than members of that community who are responsive to the voices in their own community? Who better to address the problems in education than elected community members who are most aware of those problems?

This effort begins with the local governing team — school board and superintendent — determining what their community wants and is willing to support, establishing district goals that reflect these community values and then finding the resources to deliver on the promises articulated in the goals. Those resources,

however, are very precious and in some communities severely limited. No one outside of the community has a greater awareness of or cares more for their own children than the community and its elected representatives. With the aid of effective and ongoing community engagement, the district governing team is in the best position to determine how these resources are spent and delivered.

The conversation, therefore, starts at the local level and must continue at the local level. School boards must actively engage not only with the people who send their children to school, but also the people who represent business, civic, and social institutions, people of all faiths, people of all races, people at all stations and stages in life: in other words, the *entire* community.

This document is designed to help school boards and superintendents understand what community engagement is, why it is critical, what they can expect to accomplish, and how to evaluate the results. While this is by no means a one-size-fits-all, step-by-step process, it does represent some of the best research and thinking on the topic of community engagement.

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INTRODUCTION ■

The Illinois Association of School Boards has always focused its board development efforts on helping school board members understand the importance of good governance. In 1997, a new shared clarity around what good governance looks like was introduced with IASB's Foundational Principles of Effective Governance.

Stated in their simplest form, the six principles are:

1. The board clarifies the district purpose.
2. The board connects with the community.
3. The board employs a superintendent.
4. The board delegates authority.
5. The board monitors performance.
6. The board takes responsibility for itself.

The six principles were developed through a process that examined various governance work models, information and guidance from a number of outside resources. The goal was to help school boards operate effectively and efficiently while keeping their work at a board level, i.e. focused on leading through written board policies.

Focusing on policy-directed governance enables school boards to maintain what is known as a “balcony perspective.” This concept was first espoused by Ronald Heifetz while he was teaching at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and was explained by Richard Broholm and Douglas Johnson in their 1993 book, *A Balcony Perspective: Clarifying the Trustee Role*.

Broholm and Johnson said Heifetz compared the balcony to a dance floor to illustrate the importance of having an elevated vantage point for leaders. “Because trustees (board members) are more emotionally distant from the day-to-day action of the organization, they often are in a better position to see things from a balcony perspective,” they wrote. “They can observe the whole of the dance floor without getting caught up in the dance.”

For school boards, as stated in Principle No. 1, that means their primary task is to continually define, articulate, and re-define district ends to answer the recurring question: who gets what benefits for how much? In order to define those “ends,” i.e., clarifying the district’s vision, mission and goals, the school board needs to “connect” with its community around the aspirations that people have for their local schools. Principle No. 2 describes this process as an ongoing, two-way conversation with the entire community that enables the board to hear and understand the community’s educational aspirations and desires, to serve effectively as an advocate for district improvement and to inform the community of the district’s performance.

It is important to note here the distinction between community engagement and public relations and polling. While many school districts do very good work around public relations or polling, community engagement is much more than public relations (*pushing* out positive information *to* the community) or public polling (*pulling* information or opinions *from* the community). What follows is the what, why and how of effective community engagement, a key element of community connection.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT? ■

ASB Foundational Principles of Effective Governance No. 2 states: “The Board Connects with the Community.” An essential part of community connection is community engagement. Engaging stakeholders is one of the primary responsibilities of citizen school boards. It helps ensure that the “public” in public education is preserved. Community engagement is at the heart of why American democracy has established a system of governance for our public schools using locally elected citizen volunteers — as school board members. Local boards of education are uniquely positioned to engage their neighbors in important conversations.

Definition ■

Community engagement, also called public engagement or civic engagement, is the process by which school boards actively involve diverse citizens in dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative thinking around common interests for their public schools.

Overview ■

Community engagement addresses “owner” concerns. It is not designed to address “customer” concerns. Customer concerns, such as dissatisfaction with a particular teacher or textbook, or questions about day-to-day operations, are best addressed by professional educators. For school boards, owner concerns are long-term, big picture issues about values and beliefs, mission, vision, and goals — the community’s “core values.” School boards are uniquely qualified to address these owner concerns because they are elected, volunteer citizens who can engage their neighbors in these important conversations about the community’s purposes for

its schools and the resources the community is willing to provide for its schools.

While public relations and public participation are important, community engagement is much more. Community engagement, according to the nonpartisan, nonprofit Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, involves these key principles or values:

- Ongoing public engagement, not just one-time public input
- Connecting with citizens as owners, not as customers
- Reflecting different voices or viewpoints, not just geography or demographics
- Building common ground, not just consensus
- Creating knowledge, not just providing information.

Effective community engagement works on two levels: (1) it addresses legitimate public issues and; (2) it grows the capacity of a democratic community to work collectively and collaboratively to meet the public good. Community engagement, when successful, focuses debate, galvanizes actions by leadership, and helps increase citizen support.

Community engagement can influence public policy decisions on any number of issues. It can span the range from simply providing the public with important information and gaining to requesting full collaboration in forming plans and finding solutions for identified public issues. In every case, it places value on an ongoing conversation, involvement and the common good.

To be effective, the board should be clear about its purpose for engaging the community and should clearly frame that purpose into a

promise to the public that is shared with all participants in the process. This promise, a phrase derived from the work of the International Association for Public Participation, serves to remind participants, and the board, that the community does not make the decisions for the school board. Rather, community engagement is an essential part of the work of the board as it prepares to make the vital decisions entrusted to it by the community.

As stated in Principle No. 2, the board needs to foster an on-going, two-way communication with the entire community. The *promise*, therefore, means that the board:

- will be clear about its purpose for convening the community and how it will use the community's input;
- will listen to all the voices in the community, not just the most vocal or the most well-known;
- will seek to understand the community's aspirations for the education of children in the district;
- will use that information to advocate for district improvements;
- will be respectful of time commitments; and
- will keep the community well informed about issues and progress within the district.

In return, for the best results, the board can expect that the community:

- will convey what it expects from the board in terms of what children should know and be able to do after being educated by the district;
- will offer honest, direct information that will help the board make decisions;
- will understand that the board must make those decisions based on what is

best for the district as a whole, not just special interests; and

- will respect and support decisions made after the board weighs all the information gathered.

Community engagement involves dialogue, not debate. Dialogue involves learning, discussing and identifying options, as well as facing the consequences or impact of those options. Effective dialogue requires certain beliefs and commitments from all participants. Those engaged in true dialogue must believe that ...

- Many people may have pieces to the answer, but more than one answer/solution may exist.
- All participants should listen to understand different viewpoints and hear new ideas; and they should identify and discuss areas of disagreement.
- All participants, working together, can create new knowledge.
- All participants can find areas of common ground and places of agreement to build on.
- All participants can discover new options and ways of working together.

Once these common beliefs are established, the process then can move through the three stages of effective community engagement:

- Raising consciousness — the community becomes aware of a public issue and its importance.
- Working through the issue — the community struggles with all the conflicting complexities of the issue.
- Identifying alternatives — the community considers alternative solutions and potential consequences, both positive and negative.

The time it takes the community to move through these stages may vary considerably

— from months to years — and the timing will be different with each issue and question deliberated. It is important to note that community engagement is not limited to single issues or one-time events. Rather, it is a process that should be embedded in the work of the school board and the district, as an ongoing and habitual way of doing business.

It is also important to understand that not all issues in a district rise to the need for community engagement. If that were true, district business might come to a screeching halt. Again, “owner” issues may be appropriate community engagement issues; “customer” issues are not.

When convening community stakeholders for community engagement, whatever the process, the questions should be designed to elicit responses that reflect diverse viewpoints in the community. There should be a stated timeframe for the conversation leading up to any decision, and a well-stated idea of how the information that comes out of the engagement process will be used.

The spectrum of involvement on page 10 will help clarify the different levels of community engagement and reflect how much decision-making authority the board may be willing to cede.

THE ‘WHYS’ OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ■

According to Phil Boyle and Del Burns in *Preserving the Public in Public Schools* (2012), “public leadership is the art and science of solving policy problems, making policy choices and crafting policy solutions on behalf of the public good.”

In order to solve problems, make choices and act for the public good, public leaders need to do more than talk among themselves. They need to reach out to discern the community’s aspirations on public policy issues. According to the authors, that involves three significant tasks for school leaders:

“The first task of public leadership is to create a shared understanding of policy problems and choices. Without a shared understanding, we are more likely to harm the public good than to do good. The second leadership task is to craft policy solutions that achieve the greatest possible public good. We do this by striking the best possible balance among all of the competing public values. The third leadership task is to

use democratic means to accomplish the first two tasks. This requires arts and skills of democracy such as inclusion, participation, representation, deliberation, and facilitation.”

Arts and skills of democracy ■

Those “arts and skills of democracy” are some of the hallmarks of community engagement as described in our definition. But the first question is “Why?” Why would a school board want to engage in a time-consuming, sometimes unpredictable process in order to make some of its decisions?

Finding a process that will raise consciousness about public issues, that will help the district work through conflicting views and identify options, and that will create a supportive atmosphere within the community for public education all sound like good reasons in and of themselves. But additional benefits can be identified for school districts and communities that decide to enter into this type of partnership for ongoing community engagement.

One of the biggest benefits may be to help the school board “live” Principle No. 1 of IASB’s Foundational Principles of Effective Governance:

As its primary task, the board continually defines, articulates, and re-defines district ends to answer the recurring question — who gets what benefits for how much?

Community engagement helps board members to know where they are, where they are going and what they want to do as the board detects its desired ends and articulates them in the district mission, vision, and goals. And it also provides the means for boards to practice Principle No. 2:

The school board engages in an ongoing two-way conversation with the entire community. This conversation enables the board to hear and understand the community’s educational aspirations and desires, to

serve effectively as an advocate for district improvement, and to inform the community of the district’s performance.

The best defense ■

Community engagement provides school boards with a real opportunity to be pro-active. In other words, practicing a popular football adage that states: “the best defense is a good offense.” School boards that successfully practice effective community engagement do not give special interests and reformers a chance to take over the critical conversations. Keeping the conversation in the hands of school board is like keeping the ball in the hands of the quarterback; it allows the board to keep the district moving forward. Conversely, school boards that reject or fail to actively engage their community will be stuck on defense, reacting to conversations that they neither start nor contribute to in any meaningful way.

THE ‘HOWS’ OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ■

In order for this ongoing two-way communication to occur, a number of pre-conditions or assumptions should be in place. Community engagement is not an idea that is planted one night and then springs into full bloom, miraculously providing information to help make decisions. It must be well-planned and nurtured over an extended period of time — as a process rather than a single event.

Before the process can begin, existing roles and relationship issues may need to be addressed by the board, and participants must be willing to give up “special interests” for the larger “common good.” Sufficient information will need to be gathered and adequate resources also will need to be allotted.

To be most effective and elicit true opinions, the district will need to commit to using impartial facilitators who are trained to ask not only initial questions but deeper questions that will be needed to uncover all the complexities involved in any issue. Sources for such facilitators are available through IASB or from other entities, public or private.

Once begun, participants will need to establish a level of trust so that they will be willing to share their opinions. And, ultimately, everyone will need to be able to see that the process not only is taking place but is resulting in meaningful, valuable input. While still retaining the ultimate authority to make decisions for the district, the board must become willing to share its authority to the extent that the public understands that it has been heard and appreciated.

Supportive research on benefits ■

According to Public Agenda, a public opinion research and public engagement organization created to strengthen American democracy's capacity to tackle tough public policy issues, community engagement can raise consciousness regarding the urgency of public issues and help the public understand their complexity.

By bringing such issues to the forefront and talking about them openly, perspectives can be broadened, citizens can be better informed and an awareness of a “common good” can emerge. In addition, the process can help resolve conflicts that arise when a community's values are in competition, e.g. how many individual freedoms are community members ready to relinquish in order to ensure safety for their students.

Once a school board commits itself to engaging its community in an ongoing process, a new “contract” and culture are formed. The contract, according to the University of Illinois' Office of Public Engagement, allows both sides to agree on how issues will be approached in the future and also identifies where people are and how to reach them. The culture of the district becomes such that the process can survive even when board members and administrators come and go, thus not allowing issues to “fall between the desks” and fester until a crisis might emerge.

The Harwood Institute, which specializes in helping school districts as well as other public entities connect with their communities, often talks about “authentic intent” and “authentic use.” Authentic intent relates to the development of listening skills among participants so that the community's true values and goals can be detected. Authentic use relates to the incorporation of the ideas and input brought forward through the process.

Authentic intent and use, however, need to be elevated to address board-level questions and

issues that lead to a better definition of the district and community's mission, vision and goals, i.e., issues that the board should address from a balcony perspective. These are also defined as “big picture” questions.

The Illinois Civic Engagement Project — a 2001 citizen action project led by the University of Illinois at Springfield, United Way of Illinois, and Illinois Issues designed to help Illinoisans learn how to enhance and sustain civic engagement for the betterment of their communities — viewed community engagement as a method of enabling dialogue and forums to become routine in resolving those big picture, community issues. As the public comes to understand how decisions and policies affect where they work and live, it elevates the conversation and should allow the district to focus on success rather than failure.

And by creating better informed citizens, the school board should have a greater buy-in from the community regarding the rationale used and the decisions that resulted. That can also help to tone down the emotional rhetoric that often escalates, helping to manage the debate that results when community values are in conflict.

Recognizing obstacles, meeting challenges ■

While research supports numerous benefits of community engagement to all who participate, the commitment to this ongoing process should not be entered into without acknowledging that there can be significant obstacles and potential challenges.

Community engagement is not an easy process. If it were, then every school board all across the country would have mechanisms in place to sustain ongoing efforts at reaching out to the community on any issue that requires the board to make decisions based on community values and owner concerns.

Potential obstacles can arise from inexperience, lack of resources, confusion or misunderstanding of roles, and refusing to use or ignoring best practices. It must be recognized up front that the process will take time, resources and diligence to achieve and maintain. That required investment of time, resources and diligence will limit the participant pool — even among those who would like to be involved and have a great deal to offer.

The Illinois Civic Engagement Project stated that 59 percent of people say they just don't have time because of their family commitments and 58 percent say their job responsibilities do not allow time for participation in such a process. About a quarter of community members say they either do not know enough about the issues or that they don't know how to get involved. At least 17 percent maintain that they just don't like to join a group for any reason, and another 12 percent don't want to participate because they don't think it will result in anything coming out of their giving up that much time and effort. Some don't feel they have the skills or the money it takes to be involved in such endeavors. Others say their health is too bad or they lack transportation.

Whatever the reason, obstacles can and should be addressed at the outset by a board that wishes to instill a new culture of community engagement.

Not having all the sectors of the community represented may fuel apprehension regarding the “authentic” nature of the process. If just the “usual suspects” are gathered, those who feel disenfranchised may feel even more so. A key, then, is to identify all those who have a stake in a public policy issue, to keep asking the question “who's missing in this discussion?” and to make certain that those facilitating the process go to where the people are, not just rely on the people to come to them.

A list on page 14 gives a sample of the participants who might be invited into community engagement conversations. But this is not to say the list is complete. Each community will have its own networks of residents ... including neighborhood associations and informal discussion groups. Also keep in mind that inviting the head of an office or company does not necessarily mean that specific person must attend. All invitations should allow for a “designee” of that organization to attend, thus giving the group representation yet adding diversity and additional community outreach.

The board should keep in mind that in order to reach diverse voices, it may be necessary to engage people in various settings and through various methods. For example, meeting at the board office or at a school may be intimidating to some community stakeholders. Participants may be more willing to share their opinions if face-to-face meetings are held on neutral territory, such as a community center, a senior citizen facility, or any number of local businesses that might have a meeting room.

Other examples might include changing the time for the meetings in order to accommodate the most participants, providing child care for those who request it, preparing informational packets about the issue and distributing them well ahead of the meeting, or offering a light supper prior to the meeting. Many perceived obstacles can be overcome with thoughtful planning and asking those who decline what they might need for accommodations to make it work for them.

The board itself can pose an obstacle if all of its members do not have a sufficient level of trust around the table and as a board/administrative team, suggesting that preliminary work may need to begin with a board self-evaluation to resolve mistrust, to increase communication skills and to come to an agreement regarding ground rules for board processes. Not being able

to agree on its own processes is a signal that the district may not be ready for this type of work without prior intervention.

This includes understanding and support from the district superintendent. As the face of the school district and the person who is most commonly associated with community's perception of the district, the superintendent is critical to the success or failure of the community engagement process. In fact, it will be the superintendent's responsibility to provide the logistics, materials, etc., for the community engagement process.

Once begun, the community engagement process itself can also face some challenges.

If the community is not aware of or does not sense the urgency of an issue, such as building a new school, then it may be difficult to get people to come together and talk about it. Other issues, such as changing from neighborhood schools to attendance centers, may elicit strong feelings on both sides. And some issues, such as consolidation or reorganization, may continue over the course of years, running the risk that the community may become frustrated that a resolution cannot be reached.

Another challenge is selecting the correct people to facilitate the conversation. In 2009, the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, the International Association for Public Participation, the Co-Intelligence Institute, and other leaders in public engagement undertook a project known as "Core Principles for Public Engagement." The fourth of their eight principles emphasizes that skilled, impartial facilitators help everyone involved listen to each other. Trained facilitators ensure that participants feel they can speak up within the group ... whether to get clarification or offer an opinion. Even with skilled facilitators, other important factors (besides having the true community represented) include preliminary planning and creating a supportive environment so that participants can speak freely without fear of retribution or ridicule.

Providing sufficient, accurate, and timely information so that all community engagement participants can have an informed discussion is another challenge. The superintendent's staff must be given the time needed to research, prepare, and distribute the information that will be used in any community engagement activity.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ■

Three primary principles guide successful community engagement:

- Framing the question
- Involving the community
- Building partnerships

As stated in the definition, "community engagement" should involve diverse citizens in dialogue, deliberation, and collaboration in order to better articulate a consensus in the community around one or more public issues. From

the school board's perspective, that means identifying the issue, providing information, and then seeking to gather input and opinions from as many different stakeholder groups as can be identified in the community.

Framing the question ■

According to the International Association for Public Participation's public participation spectrum, community engagement should fulfill one or more of the following purposes in regards to a public issue:

- To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the issue, alternatives and/or solutions;
- To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions;
- To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered; and
- To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

Being clear about the board’s purpose for entering into the community engagement arena can in itself help frame the questions for the discussion. That clarification may, in turn, help determine the best vehicle for reaching a diverse segment of stakeholders. The board should always keep in mind how the community engagement process will pertain to the district’s “ends” work and help fulfill the expectations set forth in goal-setting by the board that may have already occurred.

While community engagement should ultimately be an ongoing process in order to achieve maximum results and a change in district culture, it must be remembered that the events themselves that make up any community engagement process should always be thoughtfully and thoroughly planned and executed.

The ultimate goal is to create a shared purpose for the district that embraces the complexity of issues and competing values that are bound to exist among diverse opinions. By using open ended questions (those that require more than a yes/no answer) within a carefully planned and prepared setting and employing an outside facilitator, everyone gains a deeper understanding of the public issue. In addition, board members come away with enough information to make reasoned decisions on how to

move the district forward and how to keep decisions aligned with district-level goals.

Involving the community ■

Every community has a diverse range of voices that need to be heard. In many instances, board members often hear from a select few: those who come to the board with complaints, those who want something unique, or the voices that they themselves bring to the table. However, in order to have a successful community engagement process, the board needs to hear from *all* the various and diverse voices in the community.

To discover and recruit those diverse voices, the board must be cognizant of any change in demographics in the district and how that might affect the makeup of any community engagement forum. The board must also reach out to the community and not just rely on those who volunteer. Many people prefer to be *asked* rather than to volunteer. According to the Illinois Civic Engagement Project, “The single biggest difference between participants (i.e., those involved in their communities) and non-participants is that the non-participants were far more likely to say they have not been asked.”

A personal, one-to-one appeal from someone you know is far and away the most effective means of recruitment, whether through an initial phone call or through a personalized letter. Because of the growth of social media, it is easier to tap into networks of people who already have personal connections and relationships. In doing so, however, it must be recognized that not everyone who needs to be heard is a part of one of the “known” social groups.

Boards need to constantly ask the questions: “Who is *not* at the table? And who else *should* be?”

The district can map “networks” of people within the community that it wishes to reach: residents, stakeholders, and people most likely

to be affected by a certain policy or decision. To do that, the board should look for groups and organizations based on workplace, faith, neighborhoods, and ethnicity or shared interests. Larger districts may want to do sophisticated data mapping. Smaller districts may already know their constituencies and how to contact members within each group. (See page 21 for Suggested Participants.)

In each instance, the board will want to reach out to the leaders within each network. While participation by the leader may be optional, recruitment from within each network will be imperative. A recruitment message will need to be developed to appeal to core interests and motivations to be involved: a sense of giving back; the opportunity to learn; the opportunity to meet with a group of people; or a true passion for the issue.

Those four reasons, in fact, form the basic motivation for anyone to join a group and answer the question: “What’s in it for *me*?” But prospective participants in a community engagement process also need to have an answer to the question “What’s in it for the *district*?” These questions go back to the “promise to the public” discussed earlier.

While actual tools for community engagement will be discussed later, be aware that having a public meeting is not the only way to reach out to the community. Although they are widely used, they may not be the best way to get the diversity sought. The board may find that new avenues in social media or a survey may be appropriate for some public issues.

Whatever the tool, the board must attempt to be open, transparent and authentic about why it is embarking on a community engagement process. In order to do that, the board should be willing to share information gathered by the process and indicate how and why (or why not) the information was used in

any decision-making process. Acknowledging the input and how it factored into the final decision, which is the board’s to make, will help show that the district is open to asking for input and willing to consider new and maybe divergent opinions.

Being open also implies that the district will provide the best research-based information to participants to help them as they deliberate the public issue placed before them. And the board also must be prepared to listen with the intent to learn and understand rather than to attempt to control the message or be overly defensive as stakeholders provide their input.

Another big piece of community engagement involves evaluation of the process itself, which is addressed more fully later in this document. (See pages 15-18.) This evaluation shows that the district is being transparent and authentic about seeking opinions and information from all of its stakeholders. And an evaluation process also may get at the ever-present question: Was everyone “at the table” who needed to participate?

Building partnerships ■

In order to be truly successful, community engagement should be viewed as a way of life for the district and needs to be supported by the board and district leadership, who have the ability to embed the process through policies that support the practice. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, less than one-third of most community members have a child currently enrolled in the district. While this may vary among communities, the truth is that people who have children in school are more likely to know about current programs and policies, and may be more willing to support board actions.

Reaching out to the other 75 percent of community stakeholders is a must if the district wants to move forward with adequate *community-wide* support for district programs. The more

people in the community feel a connection to the district, the more likely they are to feel like partners in the decision-making process, and the more likely they are to participate and support district programs or referendum efforts.

Public participation spectrum ■

The community can be engaged on at least four different levels, according to International Association of Public Participation’s Public Participation Spectrum:

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE
Public participation goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and/or solution.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.
Promise to the public	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.
Example techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact sheets • Websites • Open houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public comment • Focus Groups • Surveys • Public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops • Deliberative polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen Advisory committees • Consensus-building • Participatory decision-making

Adapted, with permission, from International Association for Public Participation www.iap2.org; IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation. Copyright 2007. All rights reserved.

As the chart indicates, the levels of participation increase from left to right, depending on how much decision-making authority the board is willing and able to share at any given time. Each level has specific strategies, which will be explored in more detail in the next section. The board needs to decide the level of engagement to which board members wish to commit. Partnering requires some level of shared power. This means giving up a certain amount of control, even though board members retain their trustee role and ultimately decisions on any issue are the board’s to make.

Fully developed public engagement goes beyond just “informing” the public. However, a well-informed public is a prerequisite to higher levels of engagement. By practicing deliberative

reflection, clarifying their understanding of public issues through a community engagement process and then following up with deliberative public action, the board can demonstrate its desire to include all of the diverse voices in the community.

It is important to keep in mind that as the board builds these partnerships with the community the ultimate end goal of community engagement is to enable school boards and public schools to work effectively as truly democratic institutions that provide a collective benefit. The benefit is *public* education. This requires us to grow our thinking and recognize student success as going beyond student achievement as defined by test scores alone. Student success as a result of public education is better defined as productive citizens who understand and carry forward the inherent values of our democracy.

BEST PRACTICES, STRATEGIES AND TACTICS ■

Best practice tells us that community engagement is most effective when the district's leadership (the board) develops a long-term community engagement plan that allows it to respond to short-term needs/crises/opportunities in a way that is in alignment with long-term goals.

The success of community engagement, therefore, depends on making it an ongoing process so that short-term needs can be handled in an efficient timely manner. It would be cumbersome and impractical to convene a community forum or send out a survey every time a question of community values is raised. By having an ongoing process, the board will have an excellent sense of how the community might want the issue handled.

Over time, a board will be able to employ more advanced engagement methods with a community that is willing to put forth the effort because participants will know that their work helped the board to better serve the community. A commitment to an ongoing process, of course, will require an ongoing commitment of time and resources. Actual costs will be determined by each board, depending on the engage-

ment methods they choose.

The board's objective for the community engagement process should be properly framed as "a promise to the public" that was outlined in the International Association of Public Participation's Public Participation Spectrum in the previous section. Participating community members are likely to evaluate their current and continued participation in the engagement process by comparing how the results of their efforts measure up to the promise that was made to them by the board.

Framing the process as a search for shared values, with a reminder that the ultimate decisions belong to the publicly elected school board members, may help participants understand why the majority did not achieve the result it wanted. Board members also should have a good understanding of their role as elected officials and should not use the community engagement process as a substitute for the judgment that they were elected to use.

Tools and tactics to fit the task ■

American psychologist Abraham H. Maslow once said, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail."

Districts need to make certain that they have more than a hammer in their toolbox when they want to embrace the concept of community engagement. And to do this, boards need to be aware of the demographics in their community — education levels, socioeconomic, connectivity and availability of technology — before determining how they will engage not just parents but all stakeholders in the district. While one community with a preponderance of tech-savvy residents may be very receptive to engagement efforts conducted through social media, another community with less access to technology may need to recognize that face-to-face efforts may work best.

The IBM Center for The Business of Government reports that a combination of formats (face-to-face, survey, online, etc.) will be needed and one method does not replace another. Using multiple formats puts a variety of tools at the district’s disposal. Most people are more knowledgeable about face-to-face formats, because those have been the primary vehicles for community engagement to this point. While these are all face-to-face, they do have some subtle differences.

Face-to-face formats (with references to the International Association for Public Participation spectrum) include:

Community forums: An event where a panel of experts who have experience in a particular subject share their knowledge and perspectives and where members of the audience can ask questions during a preset time. It is a great resource for anyone who wants to learn more about an issue. It is also an excellent way for the district to recruit community members for other kinds of community engagement. (Inform)

Town hall meetings: Today, a term applied to almost any type of public meetings. However, town hall meetings have a long tradition in America — and they served a specific purpose.

In a true town hall meeting, every citizen would show up to discuss issues and then vote. It was not an advisory vote — it decided the matter. What we would consider a town hall meeting today probably better fits the definition of a community forum. (Inform)

Focus groups: Discussions with a small group of carefully selected people who have been convened to discuss and give opinions on a single topic. (Consult)

Study groups: A group of eight to 12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet several times to talk about an issue. In a study group, everyone has an equal voice, and people try to understand each other’s views. They do not have to agree with each other. The idea is to share concerns and look for ways to make things better. (Involve)

Listening circles: Scheduled “listening opportunities” for the public to meet with managers of services and elected officials (e.g. administrators and board members) to get more information about specific issues. (Inform)

Cultural Competency training: Helps increase awareness of differences, increase valuing of and respect for differences and develop skills for interacting with differences among people. This may be an initial step necessary before a face-to-face community engagement strategy is tried. (Inform)

Dialogue: “A reciprocal conversation between two or more persons” or a communication tool in which people suspend their attachments to a particular point of view or opinion so that deeper levels of listening, synthesis and meaning can evolve. It can be used to get to know members of the community to build trust, air feelings, identify issues and collect information. It is not used to make decisions or take actions. (Involve)

Visioning: A process usually involving a series of meetings that are focused on long-range

issues and result in a long range plan with a strategy for achieving the goals. (Collaborate)

In addition, other formats can be used to inform and engage the public:

Polling/surveys: Written questionnaires or interviews in person, by phone, or by electronic media, in which a limited sample of persons is considered representative of a larger group. (Consult)

Media strategies: Newspapers, newsletters, radio, TV, videos, billboards posters and message signs, exhibits, mass mailings, and flyers designed to provide accurate information on progress being made on community-set goals; inform community members or invite their opinions about programs, projects, or planning processes. (Inform)

While face-to-face and media-related strategies are well-documented as being successful, online tools are being used more often to reach multiple and varied sectors of the community — especially those who say “time” is their major barrier to participation. They may not have time to attend a meeting, but they might have time to answer an online survey, watch a webinar or participate in a “virtual forum.”

According to the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan source of data and analysis operated by The Pew Charitable Trusts, “The Internet is now part of the fabric of everyday civic life. Half of those involved in a political or community group communicate with other group members using digital tools, such as email or group websites.”

The Pew research goes on to say: “If people believe their local government shares information well, they also feel good about their town and civic institutions. Those who are avid information consumers from news media and online sources are more likely to be involved

and feel as if they can make a difference.”

Too much emphasis on Internet strategies, however, may disenfranchise some groups even further. For example, the Pew Center found that just 53 percent of Americans 65 and older use the Internet or email, and a third of that group uses social media, like Facebook and Twitter. Some areas may not have reliable Internet service available. But districts need to engage these people. They may not have children in the school system, but they are concerned about paying property taxes with what is often a fixed income and they seem to be more predisposed to vote.

In a survey on the future of the Internet, the Pew Center found that “72 percent agreed with the statement that by 2020, online cooperation will result in significantly more efficient and responsive governments, business, non-profits and other mainstream institutions.” Online engagement can take a number of different forms as well, including online surveys, wikis, shared work space (Google docs, cloud computing), large-scale deliberations (webinar) and serious gaming to analyze alternatives and ramifications.

The IBM Center for The Business of Government, a Washington think tank that researches public management practices, provides some examples of how the public can be engaged with the use of online tools and/or face-to-face meetings and which might be more effective: (*See table next page.*)

SCENARIO	TACTIC	WHEN TO USE	LIMITATIONS	FACE-TO-FACE?
<p>Educate citizens about a particular issue. (Inform.)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Large-scale deliberations (webinars). 2. Simulation exercises, in which participants manipulate variables to explore options. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To learn more about issues, communicate with one another (limited). 2. Encourage creative thinking, give citizens a more informed, realistic sense of the trade-offs in policy making. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lacks emotional power. 2. Needs to be supported by other tactics to be effective. 	<p>Perhaps. Most people learn better in interactive environments where they can envision how different proposals will affect their lives and where they can test strengths and weaknesses of different ideas.</p>
<p>Immediate citizen reaction to a particular issue or decision. (Consult.)</p>	<p>Online survey.</p>	<p>A quick read of where people stand on a particular issue</p>	<p>Not the same as a scientific poll; tends to over-sample informed, active citizen and under-sample those less engaged; may have a limited response rate.</p>	<p>No.</p>
<p>Work directly with the public to ensure their issues and concerns are understood and considered. (Involve.)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Citizen advisory committees. 2. Polling. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Directly engage citizens in identifying issues/considering possible solutions. 2. Get citizen input on an ongoing basis. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Commitment of staff time and some financial resources. If committee's advice is ultimately not followed, can lead to dissatisfaction. 2. Only those that feel particularly strongly about the subject will take the time to respond; this can result in heavily biased results. 	<p>Yes.</p> <p>No.</p>
<p>Encourage citizens to take shared ownership of an issue and participate in addressing it. (Collaboration.)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wikis (websites developed collaboratively by community of users who can add or edit content). 2. Shared work space. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Incorporate citizen comments in a way that is transparent; help build broad public support. 2. Small groups working on an idea or plan. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keeping up interest. 2. Same as above. 	<p>Yes. Need to bring people together where they decide what they want to do, how they will remain connected and hold one another accountable for the commitments they make.</p>

AN EVALUATION PROCESS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ■

Evaluation is a key component of any successful community engagement process. This is an ongoing check-up of how those charged with the community engagement process are doing. This may be a committee appointed or assigned by the board, or may be the board itself. Evaluation provides feedback to help determine if it is working towards the board's goals or is off track. It also monitors the effectiveness of the community engagement undertaking and its purpose. Ideally, the evaluation process should be designed at the time of the community engagement planning since key evaluation questions need to be identified based on the desired outcomes of the process. The important part is to find an evaluation strategy that works for the particular community engagement need. One size does *not* fit all.

Evaluation types ■

There are two basic evaluation types:

1. A **formative** evaluation is *ongoing during the community engagement process*; this includes an appraisal of the evaluation procedure itself.
2. A **summative** evaluation, *following the process*, makes conclusions about the success of the undertaking.

Formative evaluation allows the committee and/or board to learn what is working and what is not while the community engagement process is taking place. It helps monitor facilitators and their processes; it helps improve strategies and training; and it allows for making course corrections as the process goes along, among other

identifiable outcomes. The formative evaluation plan describes in detail the purpose of the evaluation and its intended use, including:

- *Who* is the audience for the evaluation
- *What* they want to know
- *When* they want the information
- *What form* they want it in
- *How* they will use it

It also describes in detail the methodological approach of the evaluation, including:

- The evaluation *questions*
- The performance *criteria and indicators*
- The *type* of data to be collected
- *How* data will be collected, analyzed, and interpreted
- *Who* will be involved in the evaluation process

Formative evaluations can be utilized during any type of community engagement, but are especially important within the Public Participation Spectrum for “Involve” or “Collaborate” as they are the more complex processes that by definition require a deeper level of participation and are often face-to-face sessions.

Summative evaluation allows the committee and the full board to judge the value of the community engagement efforts at the end of the activity. It is outcomes based. It is often the collection of data about the results of the community engagement event. Questionnaires, surveys, and interviews are some of the tools used to gain this data. Summative evaluations should be considered for all kinds of community engagement work, and in the case of the Public Participation Spectrum that includes “Inform”

or “Consult” a summative evaluation may be the only type of evaluation needed as these are shorter and simpler formats. They tend to be more short-term and immediate in direction.

There are basically three key points to stress in developing a community engagement evaluation tool:

1. Does the evaluation focus on the purpose of the community engagement activity?
2. Is the evaluation to be formative, summative, or both?
3. Will the evaluation result in determining the next step?

Suggested considerations in developing an evaluation process and tool ■

The following items need to be addressed in the creation of an evaluation process and tool:

- **Guiding principles:** Agree on the overarching principles for an evaluation methodology. Principles might include:
 - a. The evaluation needs to be highly participatory and include an entire range of stakeholders;
 - b. The evaluation needs to be structured and planned yet flexible enough that it can be modified as needed;
 - c. The evaluation needs to be purposeful and action-oriented allowing for any needed recommendations for change;
 - d. The evaluation needs to have absolute clarity about different objectives (*goals/outcomes of evaluation*) and the importance of each;
 - e. The evaluation should reflect the scale, the scope, the purpose, the audience, and the significance of the community engagement activities;
- **Purpose:** Determine whether the evaluation is to be formative or summative. Is the evaluation to be a quick check-in after any session of the engagement activity (formative) designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the process while it is occurring? Or do the evaluation committee and/or board want a more extensive evaluation after the activity that assesses whether the community engagement effort generated the outcome hoped for (summative)? Or do they want it to be both? It will help to consider what community engagement method will be used. The method will help determine the evaluation purpose and the type and depth of evaluation tool. Once the purpose has been determined use the indicators and evaluation criteria identified in finalizing the evaluation tool.
- **Outcomes:** What was the community engagement activity trying to achieve; did it? Were the goals and objectives of the community engagement enterprise successful? What worked well; what needs improvement?
- **Evaluation criteria:** Criteria are based on the objectives of the community engagement activity and the purpose of the evaluation itself. Consider:
 - how feedback will be built into the process;
 - how the process can be refined or improved;
 - whether the process meets the needs of all participants;
 - who shall be responsible for what and what the evaluation time lines will be; and
 - how to ensure that both positive and negative feedback is heard and considered.

- **Indicators:** Determine how the evaluation committee and or board will know that they are getting or have gotten what they wanted. What would they expect to see that indicates success? In a summative evaluation the evaluation committee and/or board would want to know what the measurable “signs” of the desired outcome are. In a formative evaluation, the evaluation committee and/or board would likely be looking for indicators that tell them about the effectiveness of the community engagement method used as it is going along.
- **Evaluation participants:** Carefully consider who is to be involved with the evaluation; for example:
 - a. Facilitator
 - b. Participants in the community engagement process exercise
 - c. Program organizers
 - d. Experts in the field
 - e. Others as identified
- **Sources, methods and tools:** Look for resources that can be used to develop reliable, valid, and efficient evaluations and decide which resources will be used.

Examples of possible questions to include in evaluations ■

As you identify key evaluation questions and information requirements:

- a. Be clear about what the evaluation tool can and cannot do based on the process used.
- b. Consider what type of indicators and information is needed to be able to answer the evaluation questions.
- c. Try out evaluation questions and ways of reporting or sharing results as the evaluation committee and/or board designs the evaluation.

Formative Evaluation Questions

Remember, that the purpose of a formative evaluation is to assess how things are going during the community engagement process so that adjustments and course corrections can be made as needed.

- Is the process following the guiding principles of effective community engagement:
 1. Framing the question?
 2. Involving the community?
 3. Building partnerships?
- Are the guidelines and procedures agreed to for the community engagement process being followed? If so, are they serving it well? If not, what the committee need to do about it?

- Is everyone at the table who should be here? Are all of their voices being heard?
- Is the process addressing the issue it intended to address? Is it staying “on track?”
- Was a code of conduct for the process established and is it being followed?
- Is the facilitation effective? Is the facilitator well prepared for the topic and the group?
- Are the setting and amenities conducive to active participation?
- Does anything need to be changed, started, or stopped to make the process more effective?

Summative Evaluation Questions

The purpose of a summative evaluation is to assess how the process went, to determine if the goals and objectives were met, and to learn for the future. Note: some of the questions are the same as for formative evaluations, but are intended to evaluate how the process went, rather than how it is going.

- Were the guidelines and procedures agreed to for the community engagement process followed? Did they serve the process well? If not, what needs to be done differently in the future?
- Was everyone at the table who should have been there? Were all voices heard?
- Did the process address the issue selected? Did it stay on track?
- Were established procedures followed? Was the established code of conduct followed?
- Was the facilitator effective? Did he/she actively encourage constructive dialogue? Was the facilitator well prepared for the topic and the group?
- Were the setting and amenities conducive to active participation?
- What was learned from the process? What will we do the same next time? Differently?
- Were the three guiding principles successful in guiding the community engagement activity to the end:
 1. Framing the question?
 2. Involving the community?
 3. Building partnerships?
- Did the process accomplish what the community engagement committee and board hoped it would?
- How will the community engagement process continue?

A well-planned community engagement process can help focus community expertise and interest toward practically any educational issue — from finance to school safety and discipline to educational goals and aspirations.

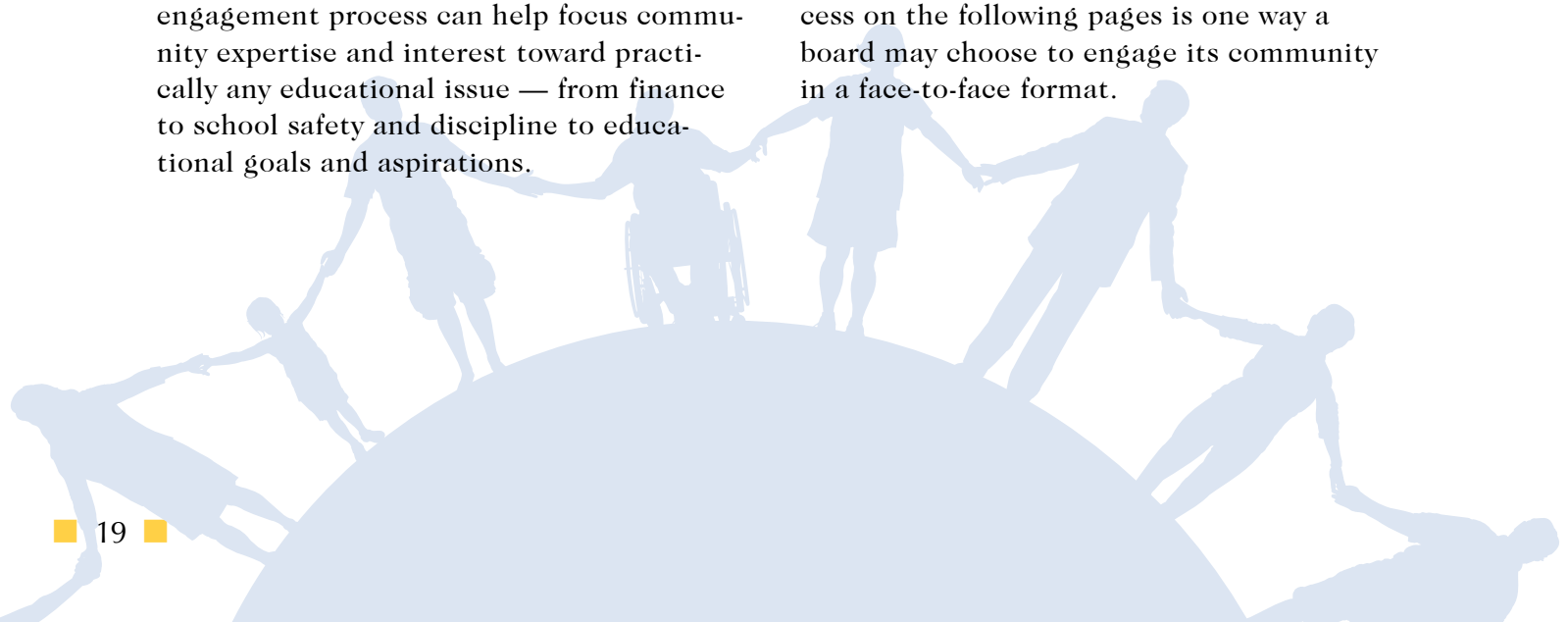
IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS: ONE APPROACH ■

One of the most challenging, yet vital roles for locally elected school board members is to gather community direction on aspirations and expectations for school district performance. Listening to constituents *before* taking action has been described as a trait of true representative leadership. For a variety of reasons, school boards can gain important input by conducting a structured yet informal community discussion.

Today more than ever, boards of education need to practice courageous leadership. This requires leadership to bring the community together for the public schools and the courage to allow the community to know, understand and wrestle with the complexities involved in clarifying its aspirations and expectations. A well-planned community engagement process can help focus community expertise and interest toward practically any educational issue — from finance to school safety and discipline to educational goals and aspirations.

Because many district planning processes primarily involve school parents and staff, it is estimated that 70 percent of the community may have little or no input. Employers, senior citizens, non-parents, and other taxpayers with no direct tie to a public school may have no means for sharing their insights into the community's overall needs *in* the schools and *from* the schools. By engaging the community, a school board is able to reach out and seek that feedback and ensure its rightful consideration. Ultimately, community engagement can give the district a snapshot of expectations, suggestions and needs from a cross-section of the community. This snapshot can then become an essential tool used for board decision-making.

There are multiple ways a board may choose to engage its community. The process on the following pages is one way a board may choose to engage its community in a face-to-face format.



Community engagement process calendar ■

NOTE: The board and the superintendent should plan all activities collaboratively.

ACTIVITIES	
PHASE I 6 weeks prior to event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold design meeting. Designate an impartial discussion facilitator. The facilitator needs to be an objective guide who is capable of assisting in designing the process, providing structure and advocating for fair, open, and inclusive procedures to accomplish the group’s work within the established time frame. The facilitator could be chosen from within the district or an outside party; however, it is essential that the facilitator is seen by all participants as someone who is impartial and “content-neutral.” Clarify the purpose of the public engagement and the board’s promise to the public. (See page 1.) Determine who should be invited. (See page 21.) Determine what specific questions/issues will be discussed. Set day, time and appropriate site for event which will be a special meeting of the board <ul style="list-style-type: none"> as a committee of the whole – no other business will be conducted at that time. (Consider that a “neutral” location rather than the school district campus may be more comfortable for some participants.) Determine processes to be followed and length of session. Decide on question(s) to be addressed by participants. Determine what background information (research, studies, data, etc.) should be shared with participants prior to the session. Identify community representatives to be invited. In high school or unit districts several student participants might be included. Determine evaluation process.
PHASE II 2 – 4 weeks prior to event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send invitations requesting RSVP including relevant background information (question(s) to be discussed, reports, data, etc.) NOTE: It’s important to allow participants enough time to read and consider the information sent. (Invitees who indicate they will not participate would be sent a follow-up letter inviting them to submit their written response to the key questions and/or to suggest someone to attend in their place.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send press release to local media. Post special board meeting and notify media as required by law. Confirm participants who will attend. Confirm evaluation format.
PHASE III Day of event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open meeting, conduct discussion, record minutes, and adjourn. Conduct ongoing “formative evaluation” as the meeting progresses. (See Evaluation Process, pages 15-18.)
PHASE IV After the event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Within 60 days of the event: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summarize information received and present to board and staff for use in decision-making, planning, etc. Share meeting summary with participants and plans for how information will be used. Within 30 days of the final board decision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the board has made its final decision, inform participants of that decision and how community engagement input informed the decision. Conduct summative evaluation of participants’ satisfaction with process and results. (See Evaluation Process, pages 15-18.)

Suggested participants for community engagement ■

To keep the meeting length of this particular process manageable and to show consideration for those invited, the discussion should be planned for no more than 20 invited participants. In reviewing this list of potential invitees, consider who is needed in the room. Who might bring some knowledge, insight, and understanding of the issue at hand? Are there representatives who reflect any economic or racial diversity in the district?

Business and Industry Representatives

- Chamber of commerce, large and small businesses
- Employers, particularly those who employ students and graduates
- Agricultural groups
- REALTORS' association

Community and Youth Service Organization Representatives

- Ministerial association, lodges, fraternities and sororities
- YMCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters
- Civic clubs, youth programs (Optimist Club, Rotary Club, etc.)
- Veterans' organizations, United Way, etc.

Social and Mental Health Service Representatives

- Local social services (e.g., drug prevention programs)
- State/local departments for local services (e.g., health department, housing authority, etc.)

Other Representatives

- Legislators
- Higher education
- Minority advocacy groups
- Neighborhood organizations and advocacy groups

Local Government Representatives

- Mayor
- Sheriff
- Chief of police
- District or circuit court judge

School District Representatives

- PTA/PTO president
- Staff union leader(s)
- Students from middle/high school/recent graduates

Other

- Community opinion leaders (aka: "regular folks" others seek out for information, input)
- Senior citizens

Sample invitation ■

Date
Address

Dear _____:

On behalf of the Unified School District Board of Education, I am pleased to invite you, as one of ____ (number) community representatives, to participate in an upcoming *Community Discussion* designed to obtain your suggestions as to _____.

The board is committed to gathering ideas from community representatives to guide our school district's planning activities. Because of your recognized commitment to our community, the board values your participation in this project.

Please plan to attend this event, which has been scheduled for _____ from _____ a.m./p.m. to ____ a.m./p.m. in the _____. It will be designed to provide invited participants with an opportunity for discussion in an informal, relaxed setting. Please be prepared to share your brief comments on the following topics:

- (Question 1)
- (Question 2)

We have included (existing district documentation relevant to the Question topics: research, data, background information, etc.) for your information as you consider the discussion questions.

The board of education's objective for this discussion will be to gather suggestions and comments from community representatives. After the board receives this information, it will be used to establish the district's prioritized goals, which will be shared with the faculty and staff for use in planning and decision-making activities during the year. Please feel free to contact _____ with any questions you may have.

We look forward to working with you on this important project. We ask that you complete and return the brief response form below to let us know whether we can expect your participation. Shortly before the date of the discussion, we will call to confirm your intent to participate.

Working together we can strengthen our efforts to continuously improve our school(s). On behalf of the students of our community, we appreciate your contribution to this effort.

_____, President, _____ Board of Education

cc: _____, Superintendent

Please check one:

- I will participate in the discussion.
- I can't attend, but will send my designee as a full participant: _____
(Name and Telephone Number)
- I will be unable to participate in the discussion.
- At this time, I cannot commit to attend. I will let you know when you call to confirm.

Name (please print)

Daytime Telephone #

PLEASE RETURN THIS INFORMATION BY [Date] to [Name] at [Address] or call [phone #] or fax this form to [fax #].

Sample press release ■

Contact: [District PR staff or designated person]
[Phone number]

[District Name] School Board to host “Community Discussion”

Our Town, IL (date) — An evening of listening to community priorities and learning about community expectations has been scheduled for [day and date] by the [district name] Board of Education.

The Community Discussion will be built around a structured, yet informal, give-and-take between school board members, school and district staff and [number] invited representatives of the community at large. Using this information, the board and district administration will formulate a system wide set of prioritized goals. These goals will in turn be shared with planners throughout the district.

The [planned length by hours] public session will take place at [site name and street address]. No other board action will be taken at the meeting.

“This session will help our school board better understand community expectations and priorities for our schools,” said [board president or superintendent; first and last name]. “The insights our guests share with us will greatly increase the input into our decision-making processes from the people who pay the tax bills that support our schools.”

Specific participants in the Community Discussion have been invited by the district for two reasons: to ensure that a broad cross-section of interests, backgrounds and perspectives are included and to ensure that board members are able to hear from all participants without creating a meeting of unacceptable length. However, any citizen wishing to attend the session or to submit written comments that will be considered as part of the process is encouraged to do so. The district must receive written comments either before or at the meeting.

The [district name] school board plans to share a report on the results of the Community Discussion within [number] days.

XXX

Community engagement suggested guidelines *(two-hour meeting)* ■

1. As invited participants arrive, each should be checked in and given a packet containing a name badge (large print) and/or a name tent card and two handouts: one identifying all participants by name and community segment represented; one restating the purpose and the agenda for the meeting. Additional copies of the materials sent prior to the meeting should also be available. Invite participants to have a seat with the school board, superintendent, and meeting recorder.
2. Board president calls special meeting to order. *(Begin on time.)* President thanks participants for attending, explains that the board will take up no other items of business, and introduces facilitator. (2 minutes)
3. Board president welcomes participants, explains meeting purpose and format, and focuses participants' attention on the key questions. This explanation includes a brief description of how community input will help the board in its planning for and monitoring of district performance and overall decision-making. (3-5 minutes)
4. Facilitator opens discussion by going around the room inviting participants to introduce themselves by briefly explaining their connection to the school system. *(Request limit to 30 seconds each.)* The facilitator should stress that the board members' role will be to listen and to clarify, as needed, and should request that comments focus on suggestions and recommendations related to _____ (key question topics). (8-12 minutes)
5. After introductions, facilitator explains the next segment of the format including the ground rules, and poses the first of the (number) questions submitted to the invited participants. *(NOTE: 45 minutes should be allowed for each question; therefore no more than two questions could be adequately discussed during a two-hour meeting.)* Based on the facilitator's judgment, individuals may be asked to respond voluntarily, or responses may be elicited from the group by going around the table(s) in reverse order to the introductory go-around (or some other process the facilitator is comfortable with). *Make sure every participant shares their comment on the question before soliciting responses to comments.* A recorder is copying notes on flip-chart. (30 minutes)
6. After all participants have commented on the first question, facilitator opens the floor for general "reaction" to what participants have heard others offer. Facilitator helps speakers to stay on point and be brief in order to ensure that all who want to comment here have the opportunity. (15 minutes) *(NOTE: If a good discussion is still going on at 15 minutes, the facilitator could ask participants if they wish to extend 5 more minutes.)*
7. 10 minute break
8. After the break, facilitator explains movement to the next question following the same process. (30 minutes)
9. Facilitator repeats the "reaction" process used earlier. (15-20 minutes)
10. Facilitator thanks all participants and solicits suggestions and shares plans concerning "next steps" in the process. The facilitator should ask participants for suggestions concerning how the information gathered should be used. Next, s/he should briefly describe how the information will be summarized for review by the board and participants and how the board will use this input. (3-5 minutes)
11. Board president adjourns the meeting. *(End on time.)*

Implementing a community engagement process facilitator's guide ■

NOTE: Information designated by *OPTION suggests an alternative option for larger groups (25-30 participants) in which discussion occurs in small groups rather than as a whole.

1. Designating the facilitator

The success of the board's community discussion may well be determined by the effectiveness of the facilitator. The person chosen to fill that pivotal role must be an independent, objective individual with training and experience in facilitating open discussions. IASB recommends the following:

- Selecting a facilitator with no direct ties to the school district, ideally a person from outside the community. (Depending on availability, IASB staff may be able to serve as facilitator.)
- Once facilitator is selected, contact IASB for support and assistance (advice, training) if necessary.

2. Pre-meeting with the board and superintendent

During the Design Meeting (if all board members and superintendent are present) or just prior to the community discussion, meet with the entire board and superintendent to review their role as "listeners." Emphasize the importance of not defending or rationalizing or "telling" during this discussion. They are there to listen and learn. As necessary, they may ask for clarification.

3. Meeting room and setting

- Select a comfortable, quiet setting conducive to verbal communications; adult seating; convenient access; and sufficient vehicle parking. Examples: a high school or public library; community center; etc.
- The meeting room could include a table large enough to accommodate

all invited participants and the facilitator. Another option would be to use a U-shaped table, with the facilitator stationed at the open end of the U.

- Request participants to select their own seat (do not pre-assign).
- *OPTION: If there are more than 25-30 participants, round tables could be provided for small group (5-10) discussions. Board members and superintendent should divide themselves among the tables.
- Choose the appropriate temperature and lighting for the room.
- If provided, refreshments could be placed on a table at the rear of the room, near entrance doors for convenient access.
- Extra seats, for non-participants (i.e., those not specifically invited, i.e., the press, etc.) should be placed around or to the rear of participant seating.

4. Equipment/supplies

- Name tent cards for each participant. These can be prepared in advance or by each participant (name only; not position).
- A flip chart easel and chart-paper; markers; tape (for visibly posting all recorder notes).
- *OPTION: If using small groups, one set of the above supplies for each table.
- Tablets and pens or pencils for each participant.

- Any other district materials to be distributed.
- Refreshments, if provided.

5. Introduction/tone

- Facilitator makes brief welcoming remarks, thanking attendees for support and willingness to contribute to the district's success in numerous ways, especially by attending this discussion. Clarify board's role — to listen and learn and to clarify as needed; not to defend or tell.
- Introduce (use flip chart) session ground rules:
 - Each wants to contribute — otherwise, wouldn't be here
 - Each can contribute — none dominate discussion; “listen” to one another and let everyone have opportunity
 - Not a competition — Trust that people of good will, working for the common good, make good choices
 - No wrong questions — together, we can discover the answer;
 - No wrong answers — “We” decide, obviously with reference to law, regulations and policy
 - Alternate or additional rules:
 - Everyone has wisdom
 - Each person's wisdom is honored
 - The whole is greater than the sum of its parts
- Post the flip chart of discussion questions (prepared in advance), and call attention to them to remind participants of the purpose of the discussion.

- Seek volunteer (but respectfully call on someone if necessary) to begin discussion, making sure that every participant has a chance to contribute. (Participants may be asked to be recognized or responses may be elicited from the group by going around the table.)
- *OPTION: Organize small group tables (5-10 per table)
 - Ask each table to appoint a recorder (and optionally, a timekeeper)
 - Periodically observe each group to ensure adherence to session rules and focus on discussion questions; answer process questions; remind them of time schedule; ensure summarization of discussion
 - When discussion is completed or at appropriate time, ask that the entire group come together (*Approximately 15 minutes should be allowed for discussion.*)
 - Ask each group to report to the entire group, assisting participants in clarifying only, i.e., not judging or defending. (*Approximately 15 minutes for groups to report.*)

6. Facilitator hints

- Ask the board to provide a recorder who is a non-participant. Recorder is responsible for writing comments on a flip chart, recording all points even if there is disagreement on them. Comments may be recorded on multiple flip-charts entitled “Notes” and “Ideas/issues.”
- Designate a time keeper.

- Call on participants by name to encourage involvement and stimulate discussion.
- Accept and acknowledge all remarks without rewording or changing them.
- Attempt to involve each participant; respectfully ask those who have not yet spoken if they want to share thoughts.
- Seek clarification of remarks and flip chart notes.
- Answer questions of process only. Let individuals clarify or explain their own remarks.
- Let the answers come from the participants. Do not make judgmental or “editorial” comments (i.e., remain neutral).
- If non-participants are in attendance, ask participants’ permission to hear from them if time permits.
- Bring discussion to close at time previously announced or seek participants’ consensus to extend the time.

7. Closing

- Ask if there are any final remarks from anyone who has not yet spoken.
- Time permitting, review flip chart notes.
- Time permitting and as appropriate, seek participants’ guidance as to relative priorities of issues/ideas.
- Thank each participant and review next steps (i.e., board consideration of issues/ideas; publication of results; follow-up meeting, etc.)
- Ask for quick feedback (verbal or written) on the value and setting of the session (i.e., +/-, should this be done again, etc.)
- Closing remarks and thanks by board president.

Additional activities to support community engagement ■

School boards new to the community engagement process need to show that their good work and early success will continue. These suggestions are intended to encourage the community that this commitment will be ongoing.

1. Hold a second discussion meeting
 - For an additional group of people
 - As a follow-up meeting of the original participants
 - a. Present summary report;
 - b. Present evidence on how information gathered is being used by the district;
 - c. After appropriate time, report on district progress toward the ends identified in the community engagement process
2. Conduct a survey to determine general public input on the key questions
3. Implement a “Board Member’s Night In” on a quarterly/periodic basis to obtain general public engagement on an on-going basis. Meetings could be scheduled at various sites around the district to meet individual citizens. This option would offer citizens the opportunity to converse with an elected representative in a personal, informal setting, rather than a structured meeting. Although informal and personal, the board would likely want to publicize a “topic” and follow a format for each meeting that would encourage citizen-owner conversation rather than customer-service venting and demands.

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IASB Foundational Principles of Effective Governance, <http://www.iasb.com/principles.cfm>

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Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/>

Public Agenda, <http://www.publicagenda.org>

University of Illinois’ Office of Public Engagement, <http://engagement.illinois.edu/>

Additional resources ■

In addition to defining the process and purpose of community engagement as part of effective school board governance, IASB has produced a video (<https://www.iasb.com/training/connecting.cfm>) that districts can share with those who want to learn more. IASB also offers in-district workshops to boards that are ready to begin the work. Learn more at <http://www.iasb.com/pdf/fieldservicecatalog.pdf>.

Watch www.iasb.com, blog.iasb.com, Twitter, Facebook, and email for information on additional community engagement resources, as they become available.





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