



# Connecting with the Community

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

## AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ■

### PREFACE (pages iii-vii)

Making the case for connecting with the community starts with a serious warning. Public education and boards of education are under attack. State and federal agencies, lawmakers, corporations, privately-funded think tanks, and philanthropic organizations are crusading for “education reforms.” Locally-elected school boards know that meeting the ever-increasing demand for accountability is difficult. But many don’t understand or realize how these attacks threaten the very existence of public education.

This report, “**Connecting with the Community: The Purpose and Process of Community Engagement as part of Effective School Board Governance**,” has been prepared to help school boards, superintendents, and communities take back local control. To accomplish this, school boards must be prepared to have frank discussions about not only what communities expect from their schools, but what efforts and resources they are willing to support to meet those expectations.

### INTRODUCTION (page viii)

Before defining what community engagement is, why it’s important, or how it works, this report reviews IASB’s six “Foundational Principles of Effective Governance.” Developed to help school boards and superintendents understand the importance of good governance, the six principles start with the premise that the board is exclusively responsible for clarifying the district’s purpose. In order to do that, school boards need to connect with their community. The remainder of this report deals exclusively with the second of the six principles, and how it allows school boards to define, articulate, and re-define district ends around community aspirations.



## WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT? (pages 1-3)

---

- Definition
- Overview

The report states that connecting with its community is one of the primary responsibilities of the school board. This section defines what community engagement is, gives an overview of what it does, and explains the purpose of effective community engagement and what it looks like.

Framing the purpose of community engagement into a “promise to the public”

establishes expectations for both the school board and the community. This section explains what the promise means for the board and what it can expect from the community. Engaging in true dialogue (not debate) also requires basic beliefs to lay the groundwork for three stages of effective community engagement. In addition to listing the beliefs and stages, this section concludes that community engagement is not limited to single issues or one-time events, but is a process embedded in the work of the school board and district.

## THE ‘WHYS’ OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (pages 3-4)

---

- Arts and Skills of Democracy
- The Best Defense

In order to solve problems, make choices and act for the public good, public leaders need to reach out to discern the community’s aspirations on public policy issues. This section outlines three significant tasks for school leaders

to develop the arts and skills of democracy. Explaining why school boards should engage with the community, this section explains how community engagement enables the board to “live” or practice the principles of effective school governance. It also explains how a pro-active stance can prevent special interests and reforms from taking over critical conversations.

## THE ‘HOWS’ OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (pages 4-7)

---

- Supportive Research on Benefits
- Recognizing Obstacles, Meeting Challenges

Before effective two-way communication can occur, several pre-conditions or assumptions should be in place. This section reviews how school boards can build a solid foundation of trust with the public. Research from Public Agenda, the University of Illinois’ Office of Public Engagement, and the Harwood Institute is used to help school boards to understand how to

reconcile competing community values, explains the difference between “authentic intent” and “authentic use,” and suggests how to sustain community engagement.

The report acknowledges that significant obstacles may stand in the way of community engagement and explains what it will take to meet potential challenges. Addressing both obstacles and challenges is needed to instill a new culture of community engagement. Time, trust, resources, diversity, commitment, and confusion over roles are among the obstacles cited.

## BASIC PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (pages 7-11)

---

- Framing the Question
- Involving the Community
- Building Partnerships
- Spectrum of Public Participation

Three primary principles — framing the question, involving the community, and building partnerships — guide successful community engagement. This section explains what it means to frame questions with a shared

purpose, the importance of diversity in community engagement, and the partnerships that result from shared decision-making. It also introduces the Spectrum of Public Participation\* and the four levels of engagement: inform, consult, involve, and collaborate. Which level of engagement a school board chooses depends on the purpose of community engagement and how much decision-making authority the board is willing and able to share.

\*Adapted, with permission, from International Association for Public Participation [www.iap2.org](http://www.iap2.org); IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation. Copyright 2007. All rights reserved.

## BEST PRACTICES, STRATEGIES AND TACTICS (pages 11-14)

---

- Tools and Tactics to Fit the Task
- Scenario

The success of community engagement depends on making it an ongoing process to meet short-term needs in an efficient, timely manner. Best practices require use of proven and tested tools and tactics chosen to fit the abilities and needs of each school board. This section describes common face-to-face formats, including community fo-

rum, town hall meetings, focus groups, study groups, listening circles, cultural competency training, dialogue, visioning, polling, and media strategies.

Data is cited in this section on the effectiveness of online tools. Examples are also provided on how the public can be engaged with online tools and/or face-to-face meetings, and which might be more effective. This information is presented in various scenarios and explains potential tactics and their limitations.

## AN EVALUATION PROCESS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

(pages 15-18)

---

- Evaluation Types
- Developing an Evaluation Tool
- Developing an Evaluation Process
- Sample Questions

Evaluation is a key component of any successful community engagement process. It is important to find an evaluation process that works

for the particular community engagement need. This section explains the difference between the two evaluation types: formative and summative. It also includes suggestions for developing and deciding on an evaluation tool, as well as the evaluation process used. A list of potential questions to include in both formative and summative evaluations is also provided.

## IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS: ONE APPROACH (pages 19-28)

- Community Engagement Process Calendar
- Suggested Participants for Community Engagement
- Sample Invitation
- Sample Press Release
- Community Engagement Suggested Guidelines
- Implementing a Community Engagement Process: Facilitator's Guide
- Additional Activities for Supporting Community Engagement

The largest section of this report focuses on one approach to community engagement in a face-to-face format. It is not prescriptive, nor is it intended to be the only approach. However, it does contain a how-to guide from beginning to end in the community engagement process.

The community engagement process calendar is divided into four phases, starting six weeks prior to the event and concluding 60 days after the event. The guide also lists suggested participants from business and industry, community and youth service organizations, social and mental health services, local government, school district, and other leaders from the community. Also included is a sample invitation to prospective participants and a pre-event press release.

Detailed guidelines for conducting a two-hour community engagement event describe what the community engagement participants do and how a trained facilitator would lead the activities. This section also includes a facilitator's guide and additional activities intended to show that the school board's commitment to community engagement is ongoing.

## REFERENCES (page 29)

Extensive research from a variety of individuals and organizations was reviewed on the topics of community engagement, public education reforms, accountability, leadership, and governance. The final section is a list of the books, their authors, the studies,

and their available websites that were used in this report. It is by no means exhaustive but should provide users of this report ample opportunity to find additional information or resources before embarking on their own community engagement process.

The complete report, *“Connecting with the Community: The Purpose and Process of Community Engagement as Part of Effective School Governance,”* can be found on the IASB website at: <http://www.iasb.com/engagement>.