



Best practices in public engagement

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What is public or citizen engagement?

In an effort to build lasting community support for schools that facilitates student achievement, many school jurisdictions have developed communication strategies that routinely reach diverse community groups. The process of building such partnerships, called public engagement, is an ongoing, two-way communication between a school jurisdiction and the community it serves.

According to the *Handbook on Citizen Engagement* published by the Canadian Policy Research Networks in 2008, “citizen engagement values the right of citizens to have an informed say in the decisions that affect their lives,” or in the case of school jurisdictions, the lives and the education of their children. Public or citizen engagement is still an evolving concept in an emerging field. As such the lines between citizen involvement, participation and engagement are often blurred.

Many of the best examples of public engagement at the school jurisdiction level are in fact planned, consistent, open, two-way *conversations* with all the stakeholders in public education, sometimes including some degree of power sharing for key decisions. They are not one-time events, nor simply good public relations or opportunities for comment. Creating an atmosphere of mutual, informed trust is vital to doing full public engagement.

Full public engagement emphasizes the *sharing of power, information, and a mutual respect* between school boards and affected or interested citizens, whether they are parents or any other stakeholders.

“The inclusion of parents, members of the business sector and others in identifying academic goals, standards, resources, and measures of progress may not only improve student achievement but also lead a community to value education and commit to its improvement. Further, board members and educators are much more likely to win public support to carry out their agendas if people know what their schools are attempting and why.” *Guiding Community Support: Telling and Selling Won't Work Anymore*

“People will get involved to the extent that the effort is fun, shows results, utilizes the gifts that everyone has to offer, and starts where people are – their network, their passion, their block. Government and other agencies can help to build community capacity by operating in ways that are neighbourhood-focused, strength-based, and community driven.” *Jim Diers, former director of neighborhood governance, City of Seattle*

“The meaning of achievement for the whole child must be rethought by the entire community, led by the board/superintendent team, and embraced by teachers, principals, parents, students, and other citizens.” *Thinking Differently: Recommendations for 21st Century School Board/ Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement*

A collaborative relationship

Public engagement is not public relations. Public relations is designed to bring others around to a particular point of view. Public engagement is a more collaborative process in which individuals and groups work through issues together to arrive at solutions they can all live with.

According to the *Handbook on Citizen Engagement*, you are not practicing true and full public engagement if:

- ◆ You deal only with the leaders of stakeholder groups
- ◆ Grant no decision-making power to shape policies or programs
- ◆ Involve people only in the last stages of policy or plan development
- ◆ Seek approval for a pre-determined choice of alternatives
- ◆ Try to fulfill public consultation obligations with no real interest in using the input
- ◆ Restrict yourself only to opinion polls and focus groups

You are practicing true and full public engagement if you do at least some of these:

- ◆ Involve citizens as individuals in policy or program development
- ◆ Use mutually agreeable two-way communication
- ◆ Sharing decision-making and responsibility for decisions
- ◆ Include forums and processes by which citizens come to informed and responsible decisions
- ◆ Generate innovative ideas and active participation
- ◆ Contribute to collective program solving
- ◆ Require transparent information and process
- ◆ Depend on mutual respect

“A school district that has good public engagement is a place where the leaders of the district - the superintendent, staff, school board - understand what their publics think of how the schools are doing and how they should be doing. These leaders regularly collect data to help them understand, and they communicate clearly with the public - the owners of the system -about how the schools are doing, what changes must be made, and what these changes will mean for students, parents, and taxpayers.

This is not about "selling" the public a new program or dressing up an old program with new public relations. Rather, it is about crafting a new relationship with the community; treating the public as the valued customers and owners of the schools...If the public's concerns are addressed, real communication can take place.” *Andy Plattner, Chairman of KSA-Plus Communications; former communications director, National Center on Education and the Economy in Washington*

The three levels of citizen involvement

Level of involvement	Flow of information
Public communication or “PR”	= One way - jurisdiction to stakeholder
Public consultation	= One-way - stakeholder to jurisdiction
Public participation	= Two-way - between jurisdiction & stakeholder

Adapted from Rowe, G. and Frewer, L.J. “A Typology of Public Engagement Mechanisms”, Science, Technology and Human Values 2005, 30(2): 255.

Points to remember

Summarized from the *Handbook on Citizen Engagement*:

- ◆ Ideally, public engagement is about sharing in agenda-setting and to ensure that policy proposals generated jointly will be taken into account in reaching a final decision.
- ◆ Public engagement is appropriate at all stages of the policy development process.
- ◆ It is a repetitive process, serving to include stakeholders’ values and priorities throughout the policy cycle. In processes of public engagement, citizens represent themselves as individuals rather than representing stakeholder groups.
- ◆ Engaging citizens in a policy or program development process from the beginning can:
 - Increase citizens’ sense of responsibility and understanding for complex issues.
 - Be an important mechanism to clarify citizen’s values, needs and preferences. It allows staff and board members to understand how the public views an issue and what is most important to them, what information the public needs to understand an issue and how to best frame or speak about an issue.
 - Lead decision-makers to make better decisions by helping them to understand the potential social and ethical implications of their decisions amongst populations that they may not be familiar with.
 - Allow leaders to share ownership for a controversial public decision with citizens.
 - Increase the legitimacy of public decisions.

“A board/superintendent leadership and governance team must develop a plan for creating (and regularly updating) a vision that "fits" its community and is consonant with high standards for children. Public engagement and community mobilization are keys to defining priorities, setting goals, and creating an educational vision, all of which must be tied to quality education for all children.

Perhaps the most important task of every board/superintendent team is to lead the community to face the problems and assault the barriers that are blocking the potential of its children. That kind of leadership can inspire and engage citizens, staff, and students – neighborhood by neighborhood, using whatever means possible – to create a community vision and long-range plan.” *Thinking Differently: Recommendations for 21st Century School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement*

Keys to success

The literature on public engagement and case studies suggest three common elements that are critical to the success of any public engagement effort.

1. Adhere to certain principles:

Be committed. A school jurisdiction should not simply view public engagement as one of its projects but as a way of doing business. It is a purposeful management tool.

Be accountable. Let the public know that jurisdiction leadership is committed to public engagement and be clear about roles and responsibilities for maintaining communication. Let the public know that their input makes a difference in outcomes and keep all publics informed of the progress in strategic planning efforts.

Be transparent. Your information, business practices and decision-making processes should be highly visible, easily accessible, accountable and open to participation.

Build trust. This means building or rebuilding relationships with people who matter most including employees, students, parents, volunteers, business leaders and community members.

Know your communities. Get to know your stakeholders thoroughly. Take the time to gather more information if you don't have enough already.

Make effective use of existing communication vehicles. Don't underestimate the power of clear, succinct messages in parent newsletters and the local press. Take advantage of every school gathering. Ask to speak at local civic organizations. Most people want to know what is going on and want to support public education.

Use technology and online communities. On-line media helps give voice to citizens who care about public schools but do not want to attend public engagement activities.

Be clear and use simple language. Every message should be viewed as a "report to the shareholders." Don't assume prior knowledge. Every message should stand on its own. Only use educational terms if absolutely necessary and then define them. Many an effort has been waylaid due to misunderstanding of key terms.

Frame the essential questions to guide dialogue. Reflective thinking can be enhanced by pointed questions. Invite key constituents to respond to these questions. Wide-open public forums invite confusion and grandstanding.

Establish a clear, open process. Initiate and publicize widely designated input/discussion opportunities. Invite key groups who are likely to question a proposed effort or direction.

Schedule public forums appropriately. At forums, consider limiting verbal input to three to four minutes per person, and invite presenters to provide a short summary to serve as the "official record" of their presentation. This eliminates some note-keeping, cuts down on misunderstandings about what was actually said, and ensures that many people have an opportunity to offer their point of view.

Promote civility. The process for dialogue should contain suggestions for protecting the right to disagree and to be civil in debate.

Emphasize local ownership. Articulate and promote the notion that people have ownership over the issue, process and product for discussion and ultimate decisions to be made.

Have a clear challenge process after decisions are made. After any public debate is complete and decisions have been made, ensure that each principal and teacher knows what the process was to reach the decision. If individuals still object to the outcome, make sure everyone knows in writing what the challenge process is – if there is one – and make it available to the unhappy stakeholders.

Discover new ways. Be creative in your methods of encouraging stakeholders to become actively engaged in your schools. From parents and senior citizens to the business and religious communities, take the necessary steps to target information to them and invite their increased awareness and participation in ways that work uniquely for them.

Have welcoming schools. How do people in the community feel about approaching the schools? Are they welcomed as your customers or are they made to feel like an intrusion into your world?

2. Use effective public engagement tools

Communications and public engagement audits. Use these analyses and reports to list and assess what has already been done on all fronts, and where the gaps are in processes or relationships. One component of the audit is a review and analysis of all written materials prepared by the jurisdiction for consumption by the schools' many audiences. (See example audit report at: <http://www.hrsb.ns.ca/files/Downloads/pdf/reports/2008-2009/Sept/08-08-1164.pdf>)

Strategic planning sessions, town hall meetings or community conversations. Open dialogues foster trust and collaboration, shared goals, and strategies.

Collaboration between schools, service-providers, businesses, etc. Shared resources and collaboration enhance learning, strengthen connection, and produce mutually beneficial results for students, schools and the community.

Public information-sharing on school performance. Communities must be informed of and understand school performance data in order to understand and support student and schools' goals and strategies.

E-mail. E-mail is a powerful, low-cost tool that can be used to connect school personnel with parents, businesspeople and other stakeholders. E-mail responses on issues cannot be considered a representative sample of opinions but they are a convenient way to communicate with diverse audiences.

Study circles. Study circles are a semi-structured, multi-step method that convenes policy-makers and the public over extended periods in small-group discussions. More than 200 communities have used this method in the last decade in the U.S. to resolve issues ranging from education reform to racism. Policymakers say study circles give them the opportunity to understand a variety of perspectives about key issues and to receive a reality check on their policy direction.

Leadership teams. Key stakeholders (e.g. teachers, parents, students and community members) brought together in leadership teams can contribute continuity and stability to the public engagement process. These teams should include people who have an institutional knowledge of the school jurisdiction and who have access to top leadership. Leadership teams monitor progress in reaching jurisdiction goals and evaluate lessons learned from successes and failures. What differentiates this method from typical evaluation processes is that the teams do not wait until the end of the project but focus instead on continuous feedback.

Special cadres. To find out what's being said about their schools, jurisdictions can seek out people who are willing to organize into special cadres. Cadre members look for things done well that can be included in school jurisdiction marketing and communication materials.

Community participation in school board meetings. School boards need input from the community to inform and support decisions. Inviting the community to participate in board meeting discussions is one way of doing that. One way is to include public Q & A sessions at meetings and to have guidelines for delegations.

(An example of how to encourage public comment at school boards meetings is at:

<http://www.vsb.bc.ca/districtinfo/policies/k/kdpublicpartboardmeet.htm>

Communication with elected officials and policymakers. Take advantage of opportunities to inform and solicit the input of other elected officials and policy makers at various levels of government.

3. Have a keen awareness of all publics

Policy-makers. Comprised primarily of legislators and locally elected officials. The less involved and informed they are, the greater the influence of single-issue, special interest groups.

Special interest groups. Many a superintendent or board member spends an inordinate amount of time and resources responding to small but vocal and energetic groups. They deserve and need to be a part of the process and debate.

Business and civic leaders. Most businesspeople know the need for skilled young people and are willing to help schools produce such individuals.

Employees. Principals, teachers and every other employee of the jurisdiction need to know and understand the jurisdiction's key goals, issues and opportunities. They need to know how they can enter the dialogue and the importance the jurisdiction places on helping other stakeholders do so too. Staff play a key role in promoting community partnerships.

Parents and families. The number one constituent group. Involved families can effectively advocate for schools with the general public. Often, informed parents are among the best ambassadors. Most parents want to know three things:

- ◆ What is my child supposed to be learning and doing?
- ◆ What progress is my child making?
- ◆ How can I help my child?

Facilitating ongoing involvement with families, with a clear focus on improving student achievement, is perhaps the most critical step schools can take to engage the community. When families are actively involved in schools, teachers learn more about the students in their class, and students are more able and willing to learn.

Community/lay people (parents and non-parents without children in school).

This group receives most of its information from the news media, neighbors and relatives. It's important to find ways of informing and involving this group in the business of public education.

Students. An often overlooked public. They will be more involved and supportive of the jurisdiction if they understand the goals and purposes of education beyond their own personal course of study.

Examples of public engagement activities

School jurisdictions in Alberta

Close to home, a number of Alberta school jurisdictions have engaged in various levels and aspects of public engagement. A few examples include:

- ♦ **Red Deer Public Schools** and **Lethbridge School District 51** both actively engage their communities through town hall meetings. In addition to internal representations (students, parents, staff), they invite a wide range of community members to the events in order to provide a broad perspective to the discussions. These are annual undertakings and they are always pleased with the interest from their communities to be involved in the planning process.

For more information contact: Bruce Buruma, Director of Community Relations, Red Deer Public Schools bburuma@rdpsd.ab.ca T: 403-342-3708; Barry Litun, Superintendent, Lethbridge School District Barry.Litun@lethsd.ab.ca T: 403-380-5301

- ♦ **Canadian Rockies Public Schools** has just completed the first year of its new three-phase Futures Planning Process. This process identifies community values, education trends and the forces of change affecting education. It determines future directions for public education in the Bow Valley. It builds on a foundation that informs future Canadian Rockies Public Schools strategic planning and decision-making, leading to actions that will support achievement of its mission.

Guided by a ‘Futures Planning Group’ of 22 Bow Valley residents and facilitated professionally, it includes a series of community, teacher, and student forums, an ongoing website questionnaire, speaker series, and considerable community outreach using a full range of public relations tools. The planning group’s mandate is to direct the process and complete a report that takes into account community values, trends and forces for change and key directions.

The group works in close collaboration with all interested people in the Bow Valley, “in ways that build awareness, understanding, participation and commitment to the process, its outcomes and its implementation.” To access everything related to the Futures Planning Process, including the first-year reports and all processes and audiences engaged, go to: www.crps.ab.ca/future-planning.

For more information contact: Brian Callaghan, Superintendent of Schools, bcallaghan@crps.ab.ca T: 403-609-6072

- ♦ ***St. Albert Protestant Schools*** hosts an annual stakeholder workshop which involves focus groups of students, teachers, support staff, parents and community partners. Each focus group discusses, with the support of a facilitator, the jurisdiction's goals and strategies and provides feedback for each goal through responses to these questions: What are we doing well? What could we do better? What's most important?

The jurisdiction hosts two annual meetings with student advisory groups and the trustees to solicit student viewpoints on current issues. Some topics discussed include student cell phone use, a sense of belonging to your school, the issue of drug use among students, bullying (including cyber bullying) and hazing (froshing).

For more information contact: Glenys Edwards, Associate Superintendent, Planning & Instruction, glenys.edwards@spschools.org T: 780-460-3712 ext.528

- ♦ ***Northern Lights School Division*** hosted several events to gather input from a cross-section of the citizens in local communities before developing its three-year strategic plan. More than 1,000 people were asked about their preferred future on educational issues. Engagement included:
 - Three community suppers for 25 people, identified by principals as having an interest in education (not necessarily parents).
 - Power breakfasts with MLAs, municipal councilors, business representatives and other local leaders.
 - Twenty-one meetings with school jurisdiction students and staff.
 - On line survey posted on the school jurisdiction's website and open to the general public

For more information contact: Roy Ripkens, Associate Superintendent, Student Services, roy.ripkens@nlsd.ab.ca T: 780-826-3145.

- ♦ ***Prairie Land Regional Division No. 25*** invites key community leaders to a meeting every year. After a short presentation, participants were asked to discuss various questions about school jurisdiction's plans and communications. Each participant is requested to complete an evaluation form about the meeting. The information gathered is posted on the school jurisdiction's website.

Meetings called "Engaging the School Communities" are held for each community within the school jurisdiction. These meetings are open to the public and are generally hosted by the local school council. The school jurisdiction presents information about the host school - describing its utilization - and then the floor is opened for questions. The school board is committed to meeting with each community before the end of the 2008-2009 school year.

For more information contact: Amber Wecker, Communications Consultant, amber.wecker@plrd.ab.ca T: 403-854-4562

- ♦ ***Battle River School Division*** hosts annual consultative forums, one each for students, parents, support staff and teachers. The forums include an overview of what's happening in the school jurisdiction and two hours dedicated to gathering information about specific topics that fit in with the school jurisdiction's current priorities. The feedback from these forums is shared with school administrators and used to assist in developing plans for the coming year.

The three counties within the school jurisdiction host gatherings with all their mayors on a quarterly basis. The school jurisdiction attends one meeting in each jurisdiction to share information about education trends and some of the school jurisdiction's activities. They also give municipal leaders the opportunity to ask questions and to discuss their concerns. This school jurisdiction has offered to host the meetings themselves, so that they can incorporate some school tours and video conferencing demonstrations into the event.

Each of the last two years the school jurisdiction has had an issue about which they wanted public input. The school jurisdiction has used public survey results to help it decide if this was something communities wanted. Questionnaires are sent to villages and towns within the school jurisdiction with a request to insert in monthly community newsletters. Ads are also placed newspapers inviting input and the questionnaire posted on the school jurisdiction website.

For more information contact: Diane Hutchinson, Communications Officer,
dhutchinson@brsd.ab.ca T: 780-672-6131 ext. 5248

- ♦ ***Calgary Board of Education*** employs a consistent, transparent engagement process born out of many adversarial school closure processes that left embattled communities hostile and bitter. In 2005, it established the Department of Community Engagement and Operational Planning. It has three goals:
 - Meaningful participation and engagement of internal and external stakeholders
 - Ensure consistent application of community engagement principles and values
 - Gather many internal and external points of view.

While intended to assist with resolving student accommodation issues, the board realized the value of public involvement in overall planning, planning for student instruction, student transportation and corporate social responsibility initiatives.

When making decisions, leaders analyze the potential impact of changes to students, parents and staff and determine an appropriate level of engagement to help inform those decisions. A key example is student accommodation planning. One project involved 10 school communities and addressed various enrolment challenges. A five-stage process that involved a focus group of parents and principals; parent council meetings at each impacted school followed by representatives from each parent council participating in a modified “world café” (see www.theworldcafe.com for a description)

Feedback was shared at an open house for members of school communities and the public. The combined feedback from each stage revised the original proposed solution. The original focus group met again to discuss the final student accommodation plan and how their input influenced the outcome.

Similar processes are in use for new school construction, school or program closures, professional development and the World Skills Calgary 2009 Advisory Group, among others. They have also helped internally: the Superintendent's Task Force on Working Relationships took management and staff from an antagonistic, non-trusting relationship to understanding and working together to resolve longstanding issues.

For more information contact: Michelle Reed, Communications Specialist, Community Engagement and Operational Planning, mmreed@cbe.ab.ca. T: 403-294-8752

School jurisdictions in the United States

According to the American Good Schools campaign, meaningful public engagement in public education reflects the will and needs of the community, and it requires initiative from the community and openness from school and jurisdiction leadership. Best practices from across the United States featured on the *Give Kids Good Schools* site (www.givekidsgoodschools.org) include:

- ♦ In **Mobile, Alabama** 48 communities came together to develop a strategic plan to address the jurisdiction's underperforming schools. Hundreds of community members showed up at a local school board meeting to show their support for the plan, which was unanimously approved. Today, Mobile County schools have made significant gains in reading and mathematics – some as much as 30 points.
- ♦ When test scores and reading levels in **Baltimore, Maryland's** lowest performing schools were in danger of falling behind the city's average, the Baltimore City Public School System joined with local organizations, parents and citizens to implement Achievement First, a program that emphasizes family and community involvement. Parents and families were encouraged to read with their children, review their assignments, and compare them to a standards guide. Additionally, many community and after-school programs were re-directed to focus on literacy. Involving parents and the community gave students the chance to practice good learning skills outside the classroom. After three years, Baltimore City schools saw scores increase to twice the city average.

- ♦ In ***Cleveland Heights, Ohio*** the community came together to address low achievement at one of its largest high schools. Through open forums and dialogue, local citizens and non-profit organizations established local governance boards to inform and create a strategy to support the school. Today, graduation rates have increased and state officials have changed the school's designation from "Academic Watch" to "Effective".

- ♦ When 98 per cent of students in the inner-city areas of ***Austin, Texas*** were classified as "at risk" by the state, parents, school administrators, and community members decided that the best way to reconnect student drop-outs to school was to create a program that adapted to their immediate needs. Garza Independent High School was created with a focus on career exploration and provides workshops on college preparation, life skills, financial aid for college, accessing online job listings, and small business. None of these services would be possible without the partnerships formed by the school with Austin-area organizations such as the police department and Community in Schools. The U.S. Departments of Education and Justice highlighted Garza as a model in violence prevention and the Austin Chronicle named Garza "The Best Public School Model" in Austin.

- ♦ In ***Paterson, New Jersey*** and communities across the state, individuals and organizations took action to improve their schools. Paterson residents participated in strategic planning for community schools and helped to develop a community schools policy that was adopted unanimously by the Paterson Board of Education.

Resources

1. *Handbook on Citizen Engagement: Beyond Consultation*. Ottawa, ON, Canada, Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2008. Download the entire handbook at no charge from <http://www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1857&l=en>
2. *The Canadian Policy Research Networks*. This organization has an entire section of its website dedicated to citizen engagement, with a number of free, downloadable reports. <http://www.cprn.org/theme.cfm?theme=109&l=en>
3. *Vital Voices: Building Constituencies for Public School Reform* (2003). This is a provocative report on constituency building, fostering collective action, and building relationships for shared power. Go to <http://scs.aed.org/publications/vitalreport.pdf> for the full report. Go to <http://scs.aed.org/publications/vitalsummary.pdf> for the report summary.
4. *Give Kids Good Schools*. This is a national organization in the U.S. that, through national activities and online resources, provides Americans with the information and tools they need to take action in their communities and improve their public schools. http://www.givekidsgoodschools.org/main/campaign.cfm?Category=A_Case&Section=Main
5. *Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Public Engagement*, published by the U.S. National School Boards Foundation (www.nsba.org). This publication guides school board members through the community engagement process and includes the rationale, benefits and concerns that are part of the process of convening the community. Although the specifics of community engagement will be unique for every community, experience shows that success is based on some common principles, a good plan and continuous work. Communities Count includes proven engagement methods and steps. Contact: mgoodrick@pmds.com T: 800-706-6722
See also: http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED468093&_ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED468093
6. *Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement*, also published by the National School Boards Association. This guide includes analyses and discussion of the issues, trends and frameworks that emerged from an examination of school jurisdiction practices plus detailed school jurisdiction profiles with creative ideas and practical solutions. It is based on the belief that it is essential that communities be involved in determining the quality of their schools and setting their future direction. https://secure.nsba.org/pubs/item_info.cfm?who=pub&ID=13
7. *Thinking Differently: Recommendations for 21st Century School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement* by Richard H. Goodman and William G. Zimmerman, Jr. http://www.nesdec.org/Thinking_Differently.htm

8. *Primer on Public Involvement*. Health Council of Canada, Toronto. François-Pierre Gauvin and Julia Abelson. 2006.
www.healthcouncilcanada.ca/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=109&Itemid=108
9. *Mapping the Links: Citizen Involvement in Policy Processes*. Canadian Policy Research Networks. Susan D. Phillips and Michael Orsini. 2002.
www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=169&l=en.
10. *Public Education Network*. Various publications on aspects of public engagement in education. http://www.publiceducation.org/pubs_publicengagement.asp
11. *Deliberative Democracy Consortium*. Various resources on aspects of public engagement in education. www.deliberative-democracy.net
12. *Journal of Public Deliberation*. Various articles on aspects of public engagement in education. www.services.bepress.com/jpd