

Public Engagement 101

A Two-Way Dialogue

**Alberta School Boards
Association**

November 18, 2008

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What is Public Engagement?

- Variety of terms used with subtle differences in meaning:
 - **Public consultation:** primarily involves information sharing (two-way)
 - **Public participation/involvement:** involves information sharing and decision influencing
 - **Public engagement:** involves integration into the decision-making process

What is Public Engagement?

- **Definition:**

A two-way dialogue involving education, information-sharing, negotiation and joint planning that contributes to better decisions.

What Engagement is Not

- Public engagement is not public decision-making. Those directly accountable for decisions continue to be the decision-makers.
- Public engagement rarely involves reaching consensus on an issue.

Demand for Public Engagement

- Public wants involvement in decisions that directly or indirectly impact them
- The more direct and greater the impact, the greater the desire for engagement
- Increased education and communication raised the desire for engagement
- Decreased credibility of and trust in an “authority” increases desire for engagement

Why the Public Doesn't Engage

- Satisfied with the status quo or proposed direction
- Feel adequately represented on the issue
- Issue is not seen as important enough to justify engagement
- Don't feel the issue affects them
- Unaware of the engagement process

Why the Public Doesn't Engage

- Don't believe that they can influence the decision-making process
- Believe that the decision has already been made
- Lack of trust in or credibility of the organization or individuals conducting the engagement process

Who is the Public?

- No single “public” but rather many publics
- “Publics” can include all or some of: students, parents, taxpayers, governments, special-interest organizations, employees, potential employees, unions, suppliers, business and community leaders/influencers
- “Public” changes as the issues change
- The more significant the issue the broader the “public”

Characteristics of the Public

- Informed or uninformed
- Supportive, hostile or apathetic
- Common interests or divided interests
- Proactive in engagement or hesitant to be engaged
- Local, regional or provincial

Why Engage the Public?

- Inform & educate
- Benefit from their knowledge, expertise & experience
- Identify priorities, issues, concerns and conflicts at an early stage preventing later problems and potential delays
- Obtain greater support for and commitment to the final decision
- Foster partnerships and collaboration

Why Engage the Public?

- Share responsibility for the trade-offs and compromises that may be necessary in the decision-making process
- Reduce conflict between traditional adversaries
- Increase the credibility of and trust in the organization as a whole
- Put into action a fundamental principle of representative democracy

When to Engage the Public

- A decision will have broad or significant impact on “publics” – when a public perceives it has something to “win” or “lose”
- A decision requires making choices between important social values
- A decision involves a subject that is already controversial

When to Engage the Public

- The organization needs public support or action to implement a decision
- As early in an issue or decision-making process as possible
- The broader or more significant the impact, the broader or more comprehensive the engagement process required

When Not to Engage the Public

- When there are no clear objectives for the engagement and uncertainty as to how the results will be used.

“Too often consultations proceed in a manner analogous to Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of America: he didn’t know where he was going; had no idea of how to get there; and was unaware of where he was when he arrived.” Anonymous

When Not to Engage the Public

- When the organization is not really willing to factor public input into the final decision
- When there is inadequate time due to the urgency of the decision required
- When there is not the flexibility available due to policies, legislation, etc. to utilize input received

Constraints & Challenges of Engagement

- Time required
- Resources required
- Lack of community readiness
- Resistance to change (internal & external)
- Confidentiality of organizational information
- Tradition of lobbying/adversarial tactics rather than collaboration
- Engagement “overload” in the community

Principles for Effective Engagement

- ❑ Engage early before key decisions are made
- ❑ Clearly define purpose & objectives before commencing engagement
- ❑ Define what specific information decision-makers need
- ❑ Clearly define the parameters of the engagement

Principles for Effective Engagement

- ❑ Clearly define for participants how engagement outcomes will be used
- ❑ Ensure scope of engagement process is appropriate for size, breadth and complexity of decision being made
- ❑ Commit adequate time and resources
- ❑ Ensure that participants can provide informed input/discussion
- ❑ Don't assume what the public may know

Principles for Effective Engagement

- ❑ Be inclusive and accessible by offering a variety of meaningful opportunities
- ❑ Use processes and tools appropriate to, and preferred by, target publics
- ❑ Don't assume you know any answers
- ❑ Use plain language as much as possible

Principles for Effective Engagement

- ❑ Ask the “right” questions
- ❑ Don’t ask if you don’t know what to do with the information when provided
- ❑ Be unbiased, presenting both positive and negative information neutrally
- ❑ Demonstrate respect for all opinions
- ❑ Listen with an “open mind”

Principles for Effective Engagement

- ❑ Focus on interests not issues
- ❑ Inform participants promptly about results of engagement and how results have been considered in the final decision
- ❑ Evaluate your process
- ❑ Recognize successful engagement does not always lead to consensus

Creating an Engagement Plan

The engagement plan should address:

- Decision to be made/issue to be addressed
- Timing of decision & engagement
- Information/input required from “publics” to help make decision
- How input will be incorporated into decision-making process
- Who the impacted/interested “publics” are

Creating an Engagement Plan

- Level of participation required from each “public”
- Most effective processes/tools to engage target publics
- Resources required to implement
- Methods to evaluate success of process

Engagement Tools

Tools must be appropriate for objectives:

- **Information sharing** to build awareness & understanding
- **Consultation** to gather ideas, test ideas or concepts, or collaborate to develop solutions
- **Active participation** to share decision making and build ownership & commitment

Sample Engagement Tools for Information Sharing

- *Media coverage
- *Advertising
- *Newsletters
- *Brochures, fact sheets
- *Websites
- *Public reports
- *Public Presentations
- *Public displays
- *Information line
- *Public hearings
- *Discussion papers
- *Site visits/tours
- *Open houses
- *Social networking

Sample Engagement Tools for Consultation

- *Interviews
- *Response forms
- *Electronic forums
- *Expert panels
- *Public opinion research
- *Focus groups
- *Surveys
- *Public meetings
- *Workshops
- *Roundtables

Sample Engagement Tools for Active Participation

- *Expert Committees
- *Task forces
- *Advisory Committees
- *Decision-making Boards
- *Facilitated small group discussions