

ADVOCACY AND YOUR COMMUNITY

Getting to know your community's competing values

To advocate for your community effectively, you must first know your community's competing community values that come into play in board decision-making. You must know what your community wants for your schools and for the community.

An effective way to get this information is through public engagement. To understand public engagement, it is often helpful to start with what it is *not*. It is not a newsletter, a survey, or an effort to get community "buy-in" to a decision already made.

Public engagement is a long-term effort to generate community dialogue around broad issues that affect a school district and the community it serves. Engaging community members in face-to-face discussions about things important to *them* provides insight into what they value and how that affects what you are doing as a school district. It also can begin to create a shared sense of direction and a willingness to share responsibility.

Here are some tips for successfully engaging your community.

- 1. Begin with the right issue.** You don't have to engage the community on *every* decision the board makes, but you should engage them in the big issues that have broad impact.

Colorado school boards have engaged community members in dialogue about such things as:

- district budget priorities
- the mission and vision of the school district
- why families are leaving the school district

In each of these instances, the board relied on data and the expertise of the staff as part of their decision-making process. But, community engagement allowed them to bring something else to the table--the "voices" of the community and a better understanding of the community values affected by the issue.

2. Frame the issue in public terms. It is important that boards and educators think “outside the box” in public engagement. If you want the public to participate in a discussion about the issue, it must be framed in terms that will be attractive and meaningful enough to get them to come to the meeting. For example, rather than asking a group of parents to help you decide the mission of the school district, it might be more effective to ask them to discuss how the school district can work to assure that their child gets the best education possible. You’ll still get helpful information to help the board revisit the mission; it will just be framed in different terms.

3. Create conversation, not education. The crux of community engagement is face-to-face dialogue on issues. This is most effective when it is conducted through small-group discussions. These discussions can take place in homes, churches, workplaces, recreation centers, schools—anyplace that people comfortably gather. Discussions should be guided, but not “managed.” There should be an agenda, yet participants should also be allowed the freedom to say what’s on their minds. The meetings should be facilitated either by a school board member or an outside facilitator and notes should be kept from each meeting. This is a time for board members and district officials to listen, not a time to educate the public on what you are doing.

4. Keep the conversations going. There are a variety of ways to structure a public engagement program and no one way is right or wrong. However it is important that engagement efforts be ongoing. Asking community members to discuss issues only when you want something—for example to pass a bond or mill levy election—will make them distrustful. The ideal would be to have several groups of people discussion several different issues. And sometimes a group will want to have more than one meeting on a topic. Letting the group take on “a life of its own” often has benefits.

5. Don’t forget staff and students. They are part of your school district community, and more important, your district family. Be sure that they are included in your engagement process. Keep staff informed about what you are hearing from the community. Providing them a better understanding of community values will only help their work.

The key to effective engagement efforts is to have a well-planned system that invites people to participate with the board in discussing issues. When

it works best, it encourages individuals to arrive at their own solutions to a common concern.

This document is part of the Colorado Association of School Board's Grassroots Advocacy Toolkit. For more information on grassroots advocacy, contact Julie George, director of government relations, at jgeorge@casb.org, 800.530.8430 or 303.832.1000.

