

The School Board's Role in Engaging the Community

While a number of activities may be called community engagement, many of these activities are actually one-way communication methods. The goal of true community engagement is to build relationships and to create a shared sense of responsibility for an issue or a problem. The following are some characteristics.

Community engagement:

- is an ongoing, continuous and long-term process
- involves "listening to" and "deliberating with" members of the public
- uses a variety of strategies to reach the full community
- seeks to find common ground among stakeholders
- centers on policy-level concerns rather than day-to-day decisions
- is often a new way of doing business for a board and a community
- School boards in Colorado have used community engagement to make decisions on such issues as how best to use scarce resources, identifying what graduates should know and be able to do, and determining how to best to serve certain minority populations, just to name a few.

In defining community engagement, it is also important to understand what community engagement is not:

1. a quick fix to a problem or issue
2. a research tool or survey
3. a forum for debate
4. a publicity method
5. a strategy for educating or persuading people

Community engagement creates *dialogue* among district stakeholders and helps stakeholders understand there are costs and consequences for every decision made by policymakers.

Why should a board engage its community?

Many believe that engaging the community is essential to preserving a strong system of public education, which is essential to a democratic society.

In his books, *Is There A Public for Public Schools?* and *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, Dr. David Mathews, president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, presents evidence that the public no longer sees itself as the owners of the public schools. He asserts that the public schools have lost the public--the very public needed in order for public schools, and democracy, to flourish.



According to Mathews: "...enlisting individuals to support the schools isn't going to be enough. Certain things have to happen in communities before Americans will see the improvements they want in education--a public has to form. And that occurs as small groups of people join forces to work on common problems, including those in education."

If that's not a good enough argument that school boards should focus on community engagement, what is?

The board's role in community engagement is aptly defined by the following quote:

"The essence of governance is the ability of a community, when engaged in a dialogue, to provide the context, overarching values, and direction the community would like to see the schools pursue." (Roulier, Monte, "Reconnecting Communities and Their Schools Through Authentic Dialogue," *National Civic Review*)

CASB also identifies community engagement as a key part of the board's "familial" or relationship-building role. When a board is exercising its familial role, it is essentially saying to the public, "Our local schools belong to all of us. Help us make decisions that best reflect the values of this community."

How should a board engage its community?

In its simplest form, community engagement is a planned opportunity to create sustained dialogue on policy-level concerns. For example, one Colorado school district began a community engagement effort to address declining enrollment by holding conversations in the homes of parents. Each participant was invited to attend three discussion meetings. The first meeting addressed the question, "Why do people leave our school district?", the second meeting addressed, "Why do people choose our school district?", and the third, "Why do people stay in our school district?"

While engagement processes vary from community to community, the most successful efforts have a few things in common.

- The entire board agrees that engaging the community is an essential part of the board's role.
- The board and administrative team develop a long-term plan for community engagement.
- The community engagement effort is well communicated to staff and, in some cases, includes staff.
- The issues discussed rise to a policy-level concern and are framed in public terms.



- Community engagement sessions create dialogue, not debate or lecture.
- Community engagement is a sustained effort, not a one-time activity.
- Community engagement engenders a shared responsibility for big concerns; it is not used to solicit support for a predetermined or one-time decision.

Community engagement is not a project for a school board. In fact, it is often a new way of governing. It takes thoughtful discussion, planning, time and often a re-ordering of a school board's priorities. Most of all it takes trust. Trust among the board-superintendent team. And trust that the public can and will help the board make the tough choices that are associated with governing public schools.

