ENGAGING the Public

How school boards can call for community involvement in important school decisions
By Harris Sokoloff

Chances are, your district has a variety of practices in its public engagement portfolio—ranging from newsletters, to public comment at board meetings, to parent volunteers, to surveys of parent interests or concerns, to parent education classes. Or you might have site-based management teams in which parents and other community members work together with district staff in deliberative processes.

The odd thing is, the greater the variety of activities, the less clear the concept of public engagement becomes. What do we mean by public engagement? For what purpose do we want to engage the public, and in what ways? Will all of these ways be equally effective? Will they get us where we want to be?

In fact, each practice in your public engagement portfolio represents a different kind of relationship with the public, and each has a different purpose. Some of those practices and purposes might well be at odds with one another in fundamental ways. So a key question is, what kind of relationship do you want to have with your public?

Images of ‘engagement’

When we think of the term engagement, several images come to mind, and these images are not always consistent. The first, and most vivid for me, is the image of two people becoming engaged to be married. With great joy and anticipation, they begin to plan a life together, and these plans are often the first major test of their relationship. Will one partner try to get her or his way, or will the two come together to work things through? Will there be a struggle over money or parenting styles, or will they work through their differences, finding common ground and moving forward together? From the wedding plans on, the couple will face issues that require give and take, with one partner taking the lead in some and the other partner taking the lead in others.

Not everyone has the same first image of the term, however. I asked a friend what came immediately to mind when he heard the word engagement. His response was “rules of engagement”—a phrase that conjures up images of the military and of business, sports, and other forms of competition. In the military, rules of engagement are essentially the rules that govern or limit contact with the opposition. The rules of engagement in sports and in the business world are similar. In all cases, their purpose is to increase your chances of controlling the situation, inflicting the greatest damage on your opponent, protecting your own safety, and ultimately marching to victory.

A third image of engagement came to me as I was teaching my son how to drive a standard-shift car. We talked about using
the clutch so the gears would engage smoothly. Here, the image is of two or more objects being brought together as part of a larger mechanism. The objects—in this case, the gears—must fit together just so. There is little or no give and take. In fact, in the car, the more give and take, the more slipping and sliding and the less well the transmission will work.

**Metaphor and reality**

Which of these metaphors best describes your school district’s engagement with parents and other members of your community? To answer this question, take a look at your behavior, the way you talk about your behavior, and the way you talk about the behavior of others. Reflect for a moment. Do you have a “public comment” portion of your board meetings? Is it at the start of the meeting or at the end? And how is the time structured? Granted, it is often necessary to limit the time each community member may speak, lest the evening be taken up entirely by such comments. But what about the other ways public comment is structured? Must citizens sign up in advance to comment? Is the time given over to public comments, with no board response and with no public interaction? Or do board members and the speaker have a short interchange? Can other members of the public ask questions?

But perhaps you’d rather look elsewhere to see which metaphor of engagement best describes your district’s efforts. Perhaps you use a district newsletter to engage parents and other members of the community. On which metaphor of engagement is that newsletter based? In my work with school districts, I receive and read many school newsletters, and many of them are exceptionally well done. They contain a range of articles on the activities of students, teachers, administrators, and the board. The articles are very informative, telling district residents—those who can’t have children in local schools as well as those who do—about student and staff successes and about new district initiatives.

This is true of the district in which my son goes to school. As I read our local district newsletter, I am thankful the district does such a good job of keeping me and my neighbors informed about activities I might not hear about any other way. At the same time, I wonder to what extent the district wants my engagement in the initiatives or events featured in the articles. Why these initiatives and not others? What kind of response does the district want from me? If I have an interest (or even expertise) in a project, how can I learn more about it? How might I get involved in a newly announced project? And what about my retired neighbor? How can he express interest or concern, or learn more, or get involved?

We can ask similar questions about each pattern of public engagement. But I am more interested in the view of the public that each form of engagement (and the way it’s done) represents. Speaking at a September 1998 seminar at the University of Pennsylvania, Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism at New York University and a major figure in “civic” or “public” journalism, suggested that every institution has within it a particular view of the public. And, he said, you can know what that view is by looking at the way the institution engages, or approaches and communicates with, the public.

Let’s go back to your school board meeting. Suppose you provide a time for public comment. Let’s look at what different schedules and structures for those comments might imply about your view of the public. What does each structure say about your “rules for engaging” parents and the rest of the public?

Is there a difference between hearing public comments at the start or at the end of each meeting? Scheduling this part of the meeting at the start might suggest that public comment is important, that you want to hear what the public has to say first, as a way of framing the context for the rest of your work. If you have public comment at the end, it might suggest that public comment is the least important part of the meeting, that you don’t really care much for what the public has to say. And what does it imply if you allow each speaker a set amount of time and the board does not comment after each (or any) comment? Might it suggest that board members think the public’s concerns and questions are unworthy of response? That they’ll “hear” but not “listen”? That they’re keeping parents and the public at arm’s length?

You might also ask about follow-up to issues from meeting to meeting. Are people encouraged to send in follow-up comments? If so, what kind of response do they get from the board or the administration?

Next, look again at your newsletter. What image of parents

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and the public is implicit there? A newsletter rich in information about the district might indicate that parents are consumers who need to be kept informed, like gears in a mechanism that need to be kept in sync. A newsletter that also includes ways for parents to find out more about programs, or get involved in or even initiate programs, might represent a view of parents as important stakeholders or partners whose input is important for the success of the work of schools.

**Rethinking the public’s role**

The more a board views public engagement in terms of the mechanistic or “rules of engagement” metaphors, the more that board might be seen as distancing parents or the public—keeping them “in their place.”

Perhaps it’s time to rethink what that place should be. Do we really want to continue the old defensive routines that keep parents at a distance? Or do we want to find meaningful ways to include them, and their expertise, to build stronger support for public education? Perhaps it’s time to look for other mod-
els of engaging parents, models that move away from the old metaphors and toward the partnership metaphor of two people becoming engaged.

Changing our view of the public requires experimentation and reflection, and experimentation might feel risky. Starting with little things can reduce the risk if you go on to do something larger. Those little things might include adding “for more information” and “to get involved” boxes in district newsletters and putting the public comment time at or near the beginning of board meetings.

On a somewhat larger scale, you might create a structure for community discussion at board meetings, selecting a topic, appointing a moderator, and setting a clear time limit for the discussion. The topics selected should not require specialized expertise, and they should be topics both parents and educators can legitimately address, such as the role of the arts in education or pressures on children. There is, of course, some tension between what experts know and what parents know. And educators have legitimate concerns about parental interference. Still, schools cannot succeed without parental support—financial, educational, and political.

There are also larger, more far-reaching ways to engage parents and the rest of the public. The principles remain the same: The board is responsible for developing and adopting policy. But the input of parents—and of citizens in general—is necessary for the board to know what policy parameters the public will and will not support.

**A case study in engagement**

I recently worked with the Mechanicsburg Area School District (MASD), near Harrisburg, Pa., to put such a process in place. The MASD school board had a problem. The district was building a new middle school and needed to decide how best to use the old one—still a serviceable building, though in need of renovation. Board members and administrators were concerned with inequities in the facilities housing the district’s elementary schools, all of which were overcrowded. Following study and discussion with the home and school associations at each school, the administration recommended turning the old middle school into a districtwide center for grades four and five. After initial board approval, however, many parents objected, and the board decided to conduct a new kind of community engagement project to solve the problem.

The project began with a task force made up mostly of teachers, parents (including those who objected to the initial recommendation), and other community members. Charged with developing a set of parameters for the board to use in determining the best use for the school, the task force decided to take these five steps:

1. **Develop a community agenda.** Public schools are an expression of a community’s hopes, dreams, and aspirations for itself and its children. Any decision concerning what to do with the vacant school must be connected to the community’s agenda—a clear sense of what the community values for itself and the role the community believes schools play in achieving those values. We developed this agenda through a series of meetings—one in each of the district’s three communities, open to everyone in that community. Discussions and exercises at these meetings aimed at uncovering what participants value for the community, the resources the community has at its command to achieve those values, and the role the community believes its schools play in achieving them. A community agenda such as this can be useful in a school district’s strategic planning.

The Mechanicsburg agenda consisted of six values: sense of community, sense of safety, quality education, participation and involvement, smallness, and economy of scale. People choose to live in Mechanicsburg because those values are strong there, and they expect the values to be supported by the schools.

2. **Develop a framework for discussing what to do with the current middle school.** In the second phase of the project, we held another round of community meetings, focusing on possible ways of understanding and addressing the issue. Again, we held three meetings—one in each of the three communities served by MASD—plus one more to consolidate the results. Participants at these meetings worked through an issue-framing process in which they outlined what they saw as the choices before the board. Three main choices emerged as realistic alternative uses for the old middle school building: developing a K-5 neighborhood or community school; developing a fourth- and fifth-grade center; or creating an alternative school that would offer multi-age grouping, kindergarten through fifth grade.

3. **Develop a discussion guide.** Once the basic framework was developed, the project task force developed a discussion guide. Using the framework and a review of relevant research as starting points, the task force put together the best argument for each of the choices identified in step two, along with the pros and cons and the benefits and costs of each; the trade-offs between the main choices; and the relevance of each choice to the values identified in the community-agenda phase of the project. This discussion guide was printed and distributed to community members.

4. **Hold community forums.** Using the discussion guide as a framework, we then held three community forums. In the space of two or two and a half hours, participants worked through each choice separately, addressing the arguments for and against each one, the pros and cons of each, and the implicit trade-offs. The goal was not to select a single choice, but to understand where there might be common ground on this issue and what trade-offs the community was and was not willing to make.

These forums clarified seven community concerns: costs, inequities, size, overcrowding and redistricting, transitions from grade to grade, neighborhood vs. community schools, and quality of education. The trade-offs were not clear in all of these concerns. For example, participants were willing to accept some inequities between elementary schools to maintain a “community feel” in the schools, but it was less clear what
trade-offs they would accept when it came to the quality of the education provided.

5. Report to the board. In its report to the board, the task force synthesized what we learned from each stage of the process and presented the concerns the community wanted the board to address in its decision making. The board did, in fact, base its deliberations on those concerns, and, in making the final decision on what to do with the old school, board members explained their positions by referring to those concerns. In the end, the board decided to use the building as a K-5 community school.

The aftermath

This time, the response was positive. Previously, parents believed the board didn’t listen to them and didn’t much care about their concerns. Now they believed that their views, and those of their neighbors, had been heard and respected. They felt their input had made them respected partners in the final decision.

One way of understanding this new feeling is that the district changed its way of engaging and working with parents and the rest of the community, at least for this project. The administration and the board suspended the old rules of engagement in favor of a partnership. It is too early to know whether that partnership will last, or even grow, but for now, each side is content with the results and with their perceptions of each other.

It will be easy to slip into old ways, though, into the old rules of engagement. Several days after the board made its decision, I received an e-mail from a parent on the task force, who had been unhappy with the original decision but liked the final outcome. Her message said she was happy the parents had won.

But had they? Under the old model of engagement, yes, but not necessarily under the model we had been working to develop. If winning meant persuading the board to decide in favor of a particular position, then our project had not accomplished all its goals. In my book, it wasn’t the outcome that mattered so much as the process. Regardless of the final outcome, the community “won” when residents came together to discuss their concerns and engaged the board in a conversation about those concerns. By addressing community concerns in its public deliberations, the board ensured a joint victory.

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