



Public Engagement **TOOLKIT**

Tipsheet: Identifying Stakeholder Groups

Your community needs to know and understand key issues confronting your school district and public schools nationally. You can be assured that a lack of information won't prevent people from forming opinions. Your community will form a perception of your school board, your school district, and public education in general with or without your help. It's better to work on providing accurate information in transparent ways than it is to leave it to chance.

But in the attempt to communicate, it's important to remember that there is no such thing as "the general public." Communities are composed of many different segments, or stakeholder groups, each with different priorities based on their own needs and experiences.

Taking time to identify key stakeholder groups in your district, and then prioritizing communications to those most affected by issues or by changes, can help you build needed support to move forward.

Identifying Key Groups

A useful starting point might be to identify key stakeholder groups, in general, that make up your school district. Most school districts will immediately brainstorm with groups such as parents, district staff, business leaders, or senior citizens. Be as specific as possible in identifying groups. For example, don't lump all employees into one group; consider the different information needs of teachers and classified staff, or elementary and secondary teachers. Likewise, elementary parents may have different needs and methods of receiving information than secondary parents.

Among groups you might consider:

- Students, parents, and families
- Educators – principals, school superintendents, teachers, and government organizations that support or are responsible for education, such as the state, county, or local Department of Education
- PTA or PTO organizations
- Government and political leaders, such as mayors, city or town councilors, or state or federal legislators
- Representatives from cultural and ethnic groups
- Leaders in business, especially businesses that support education initiatives



- Health care providers
- Prominent local funders, foundations, and philanthropists, as well as people who can mobilize local financial and other resources
- Leaders in higher education, especially colleges and universities with an interest in supporting local communities
- Neighborhood leaders and grassroots organizers
- Representatives of faith-based organizations
- Representatives of social service agencies that serve children or are invested in child well-being
- Media representatives, including people from local newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television, cable, or Internet media
- Directors of community-based organization, especially those that offer youth programs such as the YWCA, YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, 4-H, Future Farmers, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, or community centers
- City agency representatives, such as officials from parks, libraries, or law enforcement agencies

Although a general discussion is helpful, this process is most successful when it's focused on issues. Any group that is influential in the community in terms of the issue should be considered a key stakeholder group on that issue. The need to pass a levy impacting tax rates may push local business owners or rural land owners to the top of your stakeholder impact list. Changing bell times (and therefore, child-care and carpool schedules) is an issue that will put parent stakeholders front and center. The goal is to identify all the key audiences that are important to the topic.

Understanding Stakeholder Needs

It's important to remember that the more you know about where your audiences are coming from, the better you'll be able to influence them. Here are some questions to help identify audience perceptions. For each stakeholder group, ask yourself questions such as:

- What's keeping them up at night?
- Why do they have a particular attitude about the topic?
- What concerns do they have?
- What issues are they struggling with?
- What might the skeptics say?
- What positive perceptions do they have?
- What excites them the most?
- What financial or emotional interest do they have in the outcome of your work? Is it positive or negative?
- What motivates them most of all?
- What information do they want from you?
- How do they want to receive information from you? What is the best way of communicating your message to them?
- What is their current opinion of your work? Is it based on good information?



- Who influences their opinions generally, and who influences their opinion of you? Do some of these influencers therefore become important stakeholders in their own right?
- If they are not likely to be positive, what will win them around to support your project?
- If you don't think you will be able to win them around, how will you manage their opposition?
- Who else might be influenced by their opinions? Do these people become stakeholders in their own right?

A very good way of answering these questions is to talk to your stakeholders directly – people are often quite open about their views, and asking people's opinions is often the first step in building a successful relationship with them. Surveys and focus groups are two additional ways to gather that information.

Do some research or talk with people in your community to find out exactly who these people are. Aim to know them by name and think of them as individuals. For some types of stakeholders, it may be useful to know whether they have advisors or assistants, and who these individuals are.

Your objective is to identify key stakeholder groups and prioritize communications and engagement processes:

- Why are these issues important to this stakeholder group?
- What messages will ring true to which audience?
- Why will this part of the community benefit from the effort?
- What process will be used to engage this part of the community in shaping decisions?
- What is the “call to action”?