



Public Engagement **TOOLKIT**

Community Conversations

Tipsheet: Organizing Community Conversations

There isn't just one perfect way to meaningfully engage your stakeholders. "Engagement" goes by many names – study circles, table-top discussions, and dialogue sessions. You can format these kinds of initiatives in many ways – from highly formal and structured to casual and flexible. The goal of meaningful engagement, however, is to provide a forum where stakeholders with different perspectives and opinions can have civil dialogue about an issue and come to "common ground" solutions for action. It is at this stage of the communications process where true engagement happens. This is the level where people from different perspectives come together to discuss and deliberate about an issue. They go beyond awareness and understanding to support and impact.

It is important to note that this is hard work. Getting to a place where you are meaningfully engaging stakeholders doesn't happen overnight. Your credibility and trust quotients can be damaged by poorly planned and executed engagement efforts. Put the time and effort into planning to ensure that the process is transparent and inclusive.

Formats and Tools for Engagement Sessions

Many excellent resources are available for developing community engagement sessions on public education issues. Several can be used as is, or adapted to your needs and issues. A recommended resource list is below:

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation
<http://ncdd.org/>

NCDD Resource Guide on Public Engagement
http://www.ncdd.org/files/NCDD2010_Resource_Guide.pdf

Everyday Democracy

Provides a complete "how-to" guide for community conversations, discussion guides, training guides, templates, and a host of free tools to assist in meaningful public engagement.

<http://www.everyday-democracy.org>

Everyday Democracy Discussion Guides and Case Studies Focused on Education
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Issue.2.aspx>

National Issues Forum

National Issues Forums (NIF) Issue Guides on Education provide a well-supported structure for organizing community conversations on national issues affecting public schools.

http://www.nifi.org/issue_books/guides.aspx?catID=10



Evaluating Your Efforts

One way to see what meaningful engagement looks like and what needs to be planned for is to look at how you might evaluate such an initiative. The Institute for Local Government (ILG) in California (<http://www.ca-ilg.org>) developed an assessment tool to gauge the effectiveness of public engagement initiatives. The tool is useful in planning a meaningful engagement program because it focuses on the outcomes of transparency, inclusiveness, and credibility of the effort. For example:

- **Was the meeting effectively publicized in ways that would reach different stakeholder groups?** Did the participants reflect the diversity of people and views in the community? Recruitment is the most difficult part of the process. It is the most time-consuming and often the most overlooked. It takes effort on the part of the central office and all school level administrators. Including key influencers from stakeholder groups helps you reach into community networks. This step can make or break your engagement efforts. Resources for successful recruitment are included in this toolkit.
- **Was the meeting publicized in different languages and in different areas of the community to ensure participation of minorities and those who don't speak English?** You may want to have translators at the meeting.
- **Were participants given the information they needed to feel comfortable discussing the topic?** It is only fair to give people the information they need in order to feel comfortable answering and asking questions. No one wants to be that person who asks the “dumb” question.
- **Were participants allowed to give opinions to neutral facilitators and/or note takers so they had no fear of retribution?** Don't presume that employees and/or community members feel comfortable saying critical things about the district to board members, teachers, or administrators. They usually don't. Again, use your key influencers to help find people who are not school district employees and who are known as fair and temperate. You also need to provide special preparation for facilitators so they understand their role and responsibilities.
- **Did everyone who wanted to get the chance to talk?** A sample meeting agenda is provided in this resource to assist with timing. Facilitator training is important to this element as well. Facilitators should not lead the discussion but rather create a good environment for group deliberation through asking questions, raising different viewpoints, and calling on participants.
- **Did participants get clear information on how the information would be used in the decision-making process?** This needs to be part of the strategy for recruitment. People need to care about the reason for the engagement initiative and how their time will be valued. This is also important when conducting surveys and focus groups. If participants spend time giving input, but never see anything about results or how the information will be used, they will be less likely to participate again.