Community Engagement Strategies

The Purpose and Process of Community Engagement as Part of Effective School Board Governance Illinois School Board Association, 2018.

Face-to-Face Formats

Community Forums: An event where a panel of experts who have experience in a particular subject share their knowledge and perspectives and where members of the audience can ask questions during a preset time. It is a great resource for anyone who wants to learn more about an issue. It is also an excellent way for the district to recruit community members for other kinds of community engagement. (Inform)

Town Hall Meetings: Today, a term applied to almost any type of public meetings. However, town hall meetings have a long tradition in America — and they served a specific purpose. In a true town hall meeting, every citizen would show up to discuss issues and then vote. It was not an advisory vote — it decided the matter. What we would consider a town hall meeting today probably better fits the definition of a community forum. (Inform)

Focus Groups: Discussions with a small group of carefully selected people who have been convened to discuss and give opinions on a single topic. (Consult)

Study Groups: A group of eight to 12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet several times to talk about an issue. In a study group, everyone has an equal voice, and people try to understand each other's views. They do not have to agree with each other. The idea is to share concerns and look for ways to make things better. (Involve)

Listening Circles: Scheduled "listening opportunities" for the public to meet with managers of services and elected officials (e.g. administrators and board members) to get more information about specific issues. (Inform)

Cultural Competency Training: Helps increase awareness of differences, increase valuing of and respect for differences and develop skills for interacting with differences among people. This may be an initial step necessary before a face-to-face community engagement strategy is tried. (Inform)

Dialogue: "A reciprocal conversation between two or more persons" or a communication tool in which people suspend their attachments to a particular point of view or opinion so that deeper levels of listening, synthesis and meaning can evolve. It can be used to get to know members of the community to build trust, air feelings, identify issues and collect information. It is not used to make decisions or take actions. (Involve)

Visioning: A process usually involving a series of meetings that are issues and result in a long range plan with a strategy for achieving the goals. (Collaborate)

Other Formats

Polling/Surveys: Written questionnaires or interviews in person, by phone, or by electronic media, in which a limited sample of persons is considered representative of a larger group. (Consult)

Media Strategies: Newspapers, newsletters, radio, TV, videos, billboards posters and message signs, exhibits, mass mailings, and flyers designed to provide accurate information on progress being made on community-set goals; inform community members of or invite their opinions about programs, projects, or planning processes. (Inform)

Public Participation Situation Assessments
Conducted for the purpose of understanding the needs and conditions in order to design an effective public participation process. It consists of gathering information to determine the best public participation strategies.

A Situation Assessment will clarify the problem or opportunity to be addressed and the decision to be made; define the district's approach to public participation; identify stakeholders and their concerns, including marginalized communities; reveal information gaps or misunderstandings so they can be addressed; identify potential constraints on the public participation process and any surface issues that will need to be addressed. A **Situation Assessment** consists of two phases:

Phase 1: The Internal Assessment: to clarify the problem or opportunity, the decision to be made, available resources and commitment for public participation, and the district's expectations about the appropriate level of public participation
Phase 2: The External Assessment: to identify the full range of external stakeholders who should be engaged and to learn from the public to understand how stakeholders perceive the situation and decision to be made.
The results of the **Phase 1 Internal Assessment** will
- identify who (i.e., which group and/or individuals) has final decision authority
- understand how the district defines the problem or decision to be made
- identify any constraints on the decision (such as regulations and timing)
- obtain a preliminary list of stakeholders who are likely to participate in the decision and the issues associated with the decision
- identify available resources and capacity to conduct public participation
- identify the level of public participation the district is expecting.

After completing the First Phase, the **Phase 2 External Assessment** will include interviews with a broad range of stakeholders to achieve the following:
- inform them of the nature and extent of the decisions to be made
- assess their current understandings of the situation
- assess their interest in participating in the decision process
- identify additional interested and important stakeholders.

When **conducting stakeholder interviews,** ask the following types of questions:
- *How do you view the current situation?*
  - What issues are involved in the decision?
  - How important are these issues to you?
  - What are your main interests in this project or decision?
  - What information and sources of information are available to you now?
  - What other information would be helpful?
- *Who's affected?*
  - Who else should I be speaking to?
  - Whose support is crucial to implementing the decision?
  - Who has the ability to block implementation of the decision?
  - What are the important relationships among stakeholders in this community?
- *How would you like to be involved?*
  - What role would you like to play or do you feel the community would like to play in decision making?
  - What are the best forums for your involvement?
  - How would you like to receive information and what are the sources of information that you use and trust?
- *What's next?*
  - What types of things could be done to help make this a meaningful process for your community?
  - This is what you can expect from us next.

The situation assessment results should provide enough information to determine the appropriate level of public participation and recommend a design or plan for a public participation process. The public participation process recommendation should include what issues should be addressed, which stakeholders should be included, the potential areas for public input and influence, the types of information and input activities that are likely to be effective, and what schedule to follow. It should also highlight how well the district's and stakeholders' understanding of the decision and public participation expectations align and whether they need to be reconciled or otherwise managed.

Appreciative Inquiry Process

Appreciative Inquiry is a facilitated process to identify past and current practices that are already working or and where people want to increase what is working. It does not focus on the identification or solving of problems, but rather envisioning and creating a positive future. It involves selecting topics of shared interest for inquiry, conducting structured interviews to bring out stories that reveal the best of the past – or what has worked – and identifying themes to help plan the future.

Advantages
- Solicits the full participation of stakeholders in mission or vision development, strategic planning, and community development.
- Builds support for change as an ongoing process and not just a one-time event.
- Promotes heart-felt inquiry, discovery, and renewal.
- Supports organizations in transition.

Challenges
- Because this process is intended to bring the "whole system" together, when using Appreciative Inquiry at the community level it is important to make sure participants are representative of the entire community and that very broad access is created to include as many people as possible.
- Not appropriate where predictable, linear processes and outcomes are required or where the problem identification and problem-solving method for change is preferred.

Implementation
- Provide Appreciative Inquiry training/experience to all team members and decision makers to make sure they are comfortable with the process and open to possible outcomes.
- Convene a coordinating committee that is representative of the public to develop the theme or question to be considered.
- Follow the 4-D cycle for implementing the Appreciative Inquiry process.
  - **Discovery**: examine when the district/board has effectively implemented a practice or program around the selected topic (for example, community engagement; communication with parents; maintained a supportive climate and culture; high student achievement).   Ask inquiry questions to examine what the effective practice looked like and what made it effective.
  - **Dream**: consider what future success would look like for the topic (What would it look like if we had effective community engagement? A positive climate and culture? Successful students?)
  - **Design**: examine what are possible best practices and how they can be put into practice. (What needs to occur is we are going to have high achievement for each student? Create and sustain a positive climate and culture?)
  - **Deliver**: implement the identified best practices and continually monitor for effective implementation

Information: http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/

Board Members' Night In

Implement a "Board Member's Night In" on a quarterly/periodic basis to obtain general public engagement on an on-going basis. Meetings could be scheduled at various sites around the district to meet individual citizens. This option would offer citizens the opportunity to converse with an elected representative in a personal, informal setting, rather than a structured meeting. Although informal and personal, the board would likely want to publicize a "topic" and follow a format for each meeting that would encourage citizen-owner conversation rather than customer-service venting and demands.

World Café

A World Café is a meeting process that involves a series of simultaneous conversations around a particular issue or topic. A World Café typically lasts 2-3 hours and consists of numerous table conversations involving 3-5 persons per table. Each table has a "host" who stays at the table during the entire event and keeps the table discussion on task.

During the course of a World Café, participants change tables numerous times and discuss the same general topic with a variety of other participants, delving more deeply into the topic during each subsequent conversation. This enables ideas to flow around the room and participants to connect with a larger group of individuals and hear new perspectives.

World Café questions are designed to begin at a general level and move toward more specific questions with each group rotation. Through this process, participants are able to identify common themes or common ground in response to each question.

World Café Basic Model
- *Setting*: Create a "special" environment, most often modeled after a café, i.e. small round tables covered with a checkered or white linen tablecloth, butcher block paper, colored pens, a vase of flowers, and optional "talking stick" item. There should be four chairs at each table (optimally) – and no more than five.
- *Welcome and Introduction*: The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the Cafe Etiquette, and putting participants at ease. *Small-Group Rounds*: The process begins with the first of three or more twenty-minute rounds of conversation for small groups of four (five maximum) people seated around a table. At the end of the twenty minutes, each member of the group moves to a different new table. They may or may not choose to leave one person as the "table host" for the next round, who welcomes the next group and briefly fills them in on what happened in the previous round.
- *Questions*: each round is prefaced with a **question** specially crafted for the specific context and desired purpose of the World Café. The same questions can be used for more than one round, or they may build upon each other to focus the conversation or guide its direction.
- *Harvest*: After the small groups (and/or in between rounds, as needed), individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. These results are reflected visually in a variety of ways.

http://theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/

Study Circles

Study Circles are voluntary groups of 8-15 people who meet three to six times to explore a subject or issue. A Study Circle process often involves numerous individual Study Circle groups meeting during the same time period to discuss issues of common concern.

Each Study Circle group meeting commonly lasts 2-3 hours and is directed by a moderator whose role is to aid a lively but focused dialogue. Between meetings, participants read materials they were given at the end of the last meeting. These materials are usually compiled by the sponsor or organizer of the particular study circle and used as springboards for dialogue.

By encouraging people to formulate their own ideas about issues and to share them with others, Study Circles help overcome people's lack of information and feelings of inadequacy in the face of complex problems. At the end of a Study Circle process, participants from all the individual Study Circles may come together in a large meeting to work on the action items from different circles.
https://www.civicus.org/documents/toolkits/PGX_B_Study%20CirclesFinalWeb.pdf

https://www.everyday-democracy.org/