

Strategic Community Engagement

A Resource Guide

(Version 1.0)



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Setting the Context

Why Community Engagement and Why This Guide?

Definitions of community engagement vary and respond to a multitude of purposes. Community engagement is often viewed as public relations activities to inform community members about education initiatives. At the other end of the spectrum, it suggests intentional processes that mobilize the energy of every stakeholder group around a common challenge of success for all students. This guide is intended to help school and district leaders think more purposefully about the latter definition, considering the strategic relationship of community engagement to their goal of ensuring that each student graduates prepared for college, work and citizenship.

Consequently, this guide provides:

- An exploration of the contextual importance of community engagement
- A framework and guiding questions to help leaders identify appropriate purposes of community engagement and determine the most effective processes for meeting those purposes
- Descriptions of suggested tools for community engagement
- Resources to further investigate key concepts around community engagement and tools for implementation

It is important to note that this guide reflects an emerging knowledge base around powerful community engagement as examined through an *inside-out* lens of school system transformation. The framework of strategic community engagement is based on Tony Wagner's work in collaboration with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, their Washington state district grantees, and the coaches that support their efforts to graduate *all* students prepared for college, work, and citizenship. Juan Fernandez, Service Leadership Fellow at the Gates Foundation, has also contributed significantly to the thinking captured in this document. Future editions will explore *outside-in* community engagement possibilities and incorporate new learnings from the field as they develop.

Setting the Context

What's the Problem We're Trying to Solve?

Our work as educators must be strategic if we are to meet the ongoing challenges that surface daily at every level of the system - in the classroom, throughout the building, and across the district - all in the face of increasing external accountability for higher performance. There is no doubt that educators are working harder than ever before and searching for strategies that will effectively and efficiently enable success for all students. Yet unless and until we are really clear about the problems and their origins - why students are not performing at the levels we would like - much (if not all) of this hard work can be for naught. Understanding the problem(s) that we must solve enables a more accurate and sharper focus to decisions, increasing the likelihood that actions taken will lead to anticipated results.

And so it is critical that we identify and work from the core challenges in this work - challenges that have evolved over the past decades and which demand new ways of thinking and behaving. Tony Wagner¹ describes this new educational challenge as the "Rock and the Hard Place." And while each district and school may have particular problems associated with their unique context, we find these specific challenges to be universal and to have significant implications for community engagement.

The Rock: *Learning Targets that are High*

Regardless of how effective schools have (or have not) been in the past, we have a new context for our students as they prepare to enter a knowledge society. *All* students must graduate highly skilled for work, continuous learning, and citizenship if they are to have a viable economic future. Those lacking these skills will be relegated to marginal employment and citizenship. The high level of accomplishment required for success in the work world (e.g., communication, analysis, problem-solving, ability to work collaboratively) now equates to comparable skills needed for acceptance and success in college. Regardless of the pathway a student might choose, our job has changed. We now need to prepare all students to the same standard and those standards are high. Work and citizenship-ready now means college-ready. It's a new deal, which brings us to a concurrent challenge.

¹For a thorough discussion of this current key challenge in public education, please refer to Chapters 1 & 2 in Wagner's *Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools* and Chapter 1 in Wagner, et al *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming our Schools*

The Hard Place: *Students Less Motivated by Traditional Incentives*

So while we're preparing all kids to enter a changing world, the world they're coming from is changing as well.....and students are different. Today's students are less likely to be motivated by fear and show less respect for authority figures (such as teachers). Students today tend to expect instant gratification and are less likely to think success comes from hard work. To complicate matters, they're growing up alone. Kids today are increasingly isolated from adults and the kind of role modeling that has influenced prior generations.

That's the rock and the hard place: the world is different and the kids are different and seemingly moving in opposite directions. Trying to bridge this gap is an education system designed to produce what we've always produced....but not necessarily what is needed today.

Re-Framing the Problem: *Reform versus Reinvention*

Here's the catch as educators attempt to bridge that gap with a system many now recognize as obsolete: We do not know how to teach *all* students the new skills required for success in the world they will enter. This societal aspiration, coupled with the new educational challenges, requires the development of new professional knowledge, new school structures, and new ways of working systemically and strategically. Rather than reforming a system that has now grown obsolete, our system needs to be reinvented.

How does this new challenge relate to community engagement? And how does this new problem change the way we might think about community engagement?

In answering these questions, the next section focuses on identifying both the traditional and new purposes of community engagement in order to plan more strategically and effectively.

Purposes of Community Engagement

The Traditional Reasons

Let's first consider the traditional reasons we've had for engaging our communities and look at them in relationship to our new challenge. As noted earlier, community engagement has often been primarily about public relations - a valid reason in and of itself - as schools and districts communicate how well they are doing and, in return, receive the "buy in" and support to go about the business of educating children.

The response (when satisfactory) results in greater levels of **political and financial capital**: educational leaders garner the political support to be able to work toward their goals; the funding base to achieve those goals remains stable and is supplemented by a supportive community.

These reasons continue to be necessary and important purposes for engaging our community, but by themselves are no longer sufficient. The complexity and profound nature of the challenge laid out above require multi-faceted perspectives to thoroughly investigate the problem and forge solutions. Needed now is *shared ownership* around the goal of all kids/new skills and an urgency to do this work differently in order to get different results. The new reasons themselves actually describe how community engagement is an essential and strategic component to student success.

Community Defined

Before going any further, it is important to begin thinking of community in the broadest possible terms. We define community as all those who have an immediate or future stake in the impact of our work as educators. You will see this guide reference *internal* community - educators, administrators, support staff, and students - and *external* community, by which we mean parents, community members, policy makers, social service providers, church and civic organization leaders - individuals who have an interest yet are not technically employed by or directly served by the district.

And so with this broader definition of “community” as our context, we can investigate the new reasons for community engagement.

Understanding and Urgency on the Need for “Reinvention”

Many members of our communities do not understand the rapid social changes and concurrent challenges of the 21st century - the rock and the hard place we described earlier. Without an understanding of the world for which students are preparing and the world from which they come, is it difficult - if not impossible - to consider why change is necessary at all. Recognition of “why change” is a fundamental requirement of any improvement effort and critical first phase of community engagement. Indeed, why would any of us choose to do anything differently or invest energy into work that is admittedly so challenging without a deep understanding of the results needed for students to be successful (what they should know and be able to do) *and* where we are now related to that goal? As noted earlier, the complex challenges represented by the rock and the hard place - all students, new skills - require fresh thinking, multiple perspectives, and new energy.

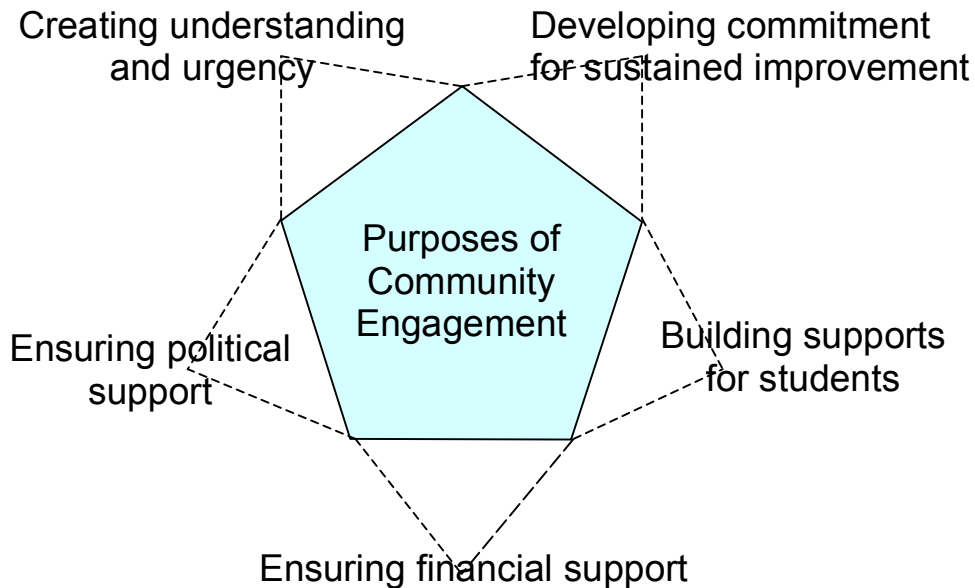
Commitment to Sustained and Systemic Improvement

But understanding and urgency are insufficient by themselves; action is required for any real change to occur. Once urgency is established, community engagement involves creating consensus on a vision and priorities with an awareness of everyone’s role in the process. Envisioning a system that is capable of graduating all students with the skills required for college, work, and citizenship again requires the perspectives of internal and external community members for a multitude of reasons: to harness the community’s expertise so that the vision is viable, to ensure that it reflects the community’s wants and needs, to develop the skills needed for successful implementation, and to build support for implementation and sustainable efforts.

Strong Supports for Students

Ensuring that each student leaves high school with the competencies needed for success in college and work and to be active citizens in our increasingly complex society requires strong supports for students at school as well as from their parents and the community. As Tony Wagner points out, “students need more adult involvement in their lives and parents need to know how to support their child’s learning.” Although students have always needed supportive adults, our new and significant challenges make strong supports more vital than ever and a critical dimension of community engagement.

Together these five purposes for community engagement create a framework of integrated and interacting components for strategic community engagement planning.



FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The framework represents a system of community engagement in that each purpose impacts the other and in that these purposes are interconnected in their implementation. In other words, the five purposes we've noted for community engagement may occur at different times, but it is unlikely that districts will address them sequentially. You may determine after reviewing the questions below that there is an obvious starting place, but the reality is that all five need to be ongoing and the actions of each will undoubtedly impact the success of the others.

Tension between the Old and New Reasons

Those who have been in this work for some time will recognize apparent contradictions between the old and new purposes of community engagement. There is risk involved in exposing a system that may not be delivering the results the community has assumed. Leaders who enjoy longevity in their school or district will recognize the challenge of engaging their communities around the need to do better (the new reasons) and still maintain sufficient political and financial capital (the traditional reasons) to enact a vision that will deliver the results kids now need.

There is no easy answer to this dilemma. We have found that an honest examination of the new challenges faced by a 21st century knowledge economy, an attitude that is absent of blame and which focuses on reinvention rather than reform can mitigate much of the risk, which admittedly is real. On the other hand, we know of no change effort that has been successfully implemented and sustained without the strategic preparation and engagement of its stakeholders. We suggest that a valid need for caution not circumvent the very real needs and goals of community engagement.

That said, we now turn to some guiding questions to help you think about community engagement in the context of your own district (which include the current levels of political and financial support) and where you might need to develop urgency, commitment to a specific vision of improvement, and stronger supports for students.

Strategic community engagement involves the employment of activities and processes that explicitly match the purposes of your specific situation. It begins with deliberate conversations among your leadership to understand your context and where you might need to backtrack or move forward, who else needs to be involved, and when. We have provided you with a number of resources to help you get started, beginning with some key questions to help you think about where you are in the community engagement process.

In some ways we can think about each of these purposes as phases. Certainly developing urgency and understanding around the problem needs to precede commitment to any vision of continued improvement. And it is difficult to understand what supports will be required for students before there is a clear picture of what that improvement looks like. Many districts find that each new change initiative leads naturally to another and that the community needs to be engaged in a cycle of reinvention and excellence, responding to data, understanding the problem, and thinking through solutions. We also find, particularly in larger districts, that these phases overlap one another and that different segments of the community may engage in a phase preliminarily, preparing to then support the engagement of others, continually broadening the conversation until they have reached a critical mass. At some point, too, you will undoubtedly distinguish more clearly among roles and responsibilities during implementation, coming back together periodically to take stock of your successes and continued challenges.

We suggest that you begin by engaging your leadership team² around the guiding questions below oriented to the new reasons for community engagement. As these help you think more purposefully around your needs, you'll find resources in the next section to support each of the community engagement purposes. And, we (those contributing to this guide) are happy to help you think through the resources and to match some of the ideas below to your particular context.

² We use the term *leadership team* loosely in this guide. We have seen the make-up of these teams range from cabinet level central office personnel, to combinations of building administrators, to more representative groups of community stakeholders (such as teacher and parent leadership). We think that however you *begin*, you will find the need to broaden the input to your decisions around community engagement. A critical component at any stage, however, is the involvement and sponsorship of district level leaders; achieving authentic urgency and commitment require a clear priority statement from these individuals.

Understanding and Urgency for Change

Do our internal and external communities exhibit urgency and understanding around the need for reinvention?

- Is there a shared understanding of the problem in relation to our local, national, and global context? *How do we know?*
- Do our internal and external communities understand the importance of graduating all students ready for college, work, and citizenship? *How do we know?*
- Do current perceptions support our work in improving instruction and success for all students? *How do we know?*

If the answer is no to these questions, consider

- What assumptions guide our internal and external communities' view of our current reality?
- Where do we see gaps in understanding about the importance of a vision of graduating all students ready for college, work, and citizenship?
- What do various stakeholder groups need in order to develop this understanding and urgency?
- How will we know when that understanding and urgency has reached a critical mass?
- How do we ensure that we develop urgency in a way that does not lead to blame, but rather leads to a shared responsibility?
- What data or experiences will have the highest impact? How might conversations between our internal community and external community enhance understanding and urgency around a common problem and shared vision?

Stakeholder Commitment to Sustained and Systemic Improvement

What is the level of commitment in our community to sustained and systemic improvement?

- Does a critical mass of internal and external community members have a shared vision of and for sustainable and systemic improvement? *How do we know?*
- Do our internal and external communities take responsibility for reaching our goal of all students graduating reading for college, work, and citizenship? *What would this look like and how do we know?*
- Is there clarity among the various stakeholder groups around their roles and contributions to this work? *How do we know?*

If the answer is no to these questions, consider

- What would various stakeholder groups need in order to develop a shared picture and commitment to sustainable and systemic improvement?
- What are the essential conversations and agreements that must take place and between whom?
- What strategies will result in student success that can be clearly linked to the problem? How do we describe our theory of action around these strategies?
- What competencies need to be developed in various stakeholder groups for members to fill their role in ensuring our students graduate ready for college, work and citizenship?

Strong Supports for Students

What supports are in place for students to be successful?

- Are students well supported for academic, social, and emotional success outside of the school day? *How do we know?*
- Do our external community members (parents and others) feel connections and ownership in their schools? *How do we know?*
- Are we engaging parents in a way that leads to this shared support of student learning? *How do we know?*

If not, consider

- What supports do parents in our schools need in order to better support their children's learning?
- What do we need to understand in order to effectively engage our many different parent and stakeholder groups? How might we adapt existing structures in ways that authenticate and strengthen the relationship of parents and community members to student learning (e.g., culminating projects)?
- What role might students play in parental involvement so that relationships are clarified and strengthened within families and with schools in support of student learning?
- What do we know about the resources available through our parents and community partners?
- Are we considering powerful enough community partnerships that also support individual student learning? Where might there be some untapped potential learning relationships (most importantly) for those students who don't currently have powerful adult relationships outside of school?

We find the use of data to be the most powerful tool in any improvement effort, and community engagement is no exception. Although the specific data sets you develop should link to what you know about your internal and external communities, we can offer some suggestions for types of data you might consider and some effective ways for presentation. Some data will be more appropriate for creating urgency, others for developing a shared picture and commitment or student support needs. We have found, however, that regardless of your emphasis, it is always necessary to revisit the need for change - hopefully built upon a platform of celebration (this is what we've done successfully) but which highlights the need for continued improvement (and this is where we still need to focus). We present three sources of data - contextual, quantitative, and qualitative and suggest that all three are necessary to build a complete and compelling picture of the need for improvement.

Contextual Data

There is great power in understanding how the world has changed as impetus for changing education, as we described earlier in this guide. These descriptions range from global, to national, to local; all are important. It is critical to help internal and external community members understand the world their students will enter as they make sense of what students now need to know and be able to do and how the adults around them need to adapt in response. There are a number of text-based resources that can serve as data for conversation. These are listed below. We also suggest a more local - or personal - addition so that community members do not discount that their situation is unique. Examples might include local business people talking about the skills they need, syllabi from local community colleges and vocational schools, and recent graduates from your high school who can describe how they were or were not prepared for life beyond high school.

Suggested Resources:

1] *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* (February 2005).

This study captures the reflections of recent high school graduates on the quality of their high school education and of college educators and employers on the preparation of high school graduates for college and work. It provides compelling data about the need for more rigor and higher expectations in the high school learning experience.

[http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/pollreport/\\$file/pollreport.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/pollreport/$file/pollreport.pdf)

The press release of the study provides a helpful summary and overview of the findings.

[http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/pollrelease/\\$file/pollrelease.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/pollrelease/$file/pollrelease.pdf)

A PowerPoint presentation of the findings of the study is another useful resource for presenting key data in relationship to the issue of the necessity of graduating all students ready for college and work.

[http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/poll/\\$file/poll.ppt#1](http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/poll/$file/poll.ppt#1)

2] *On Course for Success: A Close Look at Selected High School Courses that Prepare All Students for College* ACT and Education Trust

This report describes the current reality of the preparation (or lack thereof) of high school graduates for entering college, why taking on this issue is so critical, and points to schools that have begun to address this issue through providing high-level college-oriented content, well-qualified teachers, flexible pedagogical styles, and tutorial support.

http://www.act.org/path/policy/pdf/success_report.pdf

3] *Connecting Education Standards and Employment: Course Taking Patterns of Young Workers* Anthony Carnevale and Donna Desrochers

This American Diploma Project workplace study provides significant data of the relationship between rigorous learning in high school to successful employment.

[http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/ADP_Workplace_12-9-02/\\$file/ADP_Workplace_12-9-02.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/ADP_Workplace_12-9-02/$file/ADP_Workplace_12-9-02.pdf)

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data can provide a picture of the problem at a very fundamental level. It is hard to argue with numbers and they can be disaggregated in ways that are specific to your community. Using this data in intentional and focused ways can lead to a beginning understanding of the problem and help to develop a realization that *not changing* can have deleterious effects on students.

We provide two key guidelines for using quantitative data:

- Disaggregate the data and keep it simple
- Dramatize the data in its presentation

Disaggregating data. As mentioned above, the numbers you use should be personal to your community (such as poverty or ethnicity) and commanding enough in their message to create some discomfort and around which people will rally. Some of the data sets found to be particularly powerful include

- % reading at grade level at the end of elementary and middle schools
- % of cohort group who graduate from high school
- % who attend postsecondary
- % who earn a diploma or certification
- % who will not graduate without passing the WASL.

As an example, the Mabton School district told its community several years ago that if this were 2008, only one in ten students would graduate because they had not passed the WASL. They were also able to show that the 10% who were passing the WASL were Caucasian, noting the disparity of achievement between a predominantly Hispanic community and their Caucasian students.

Dramatize the Data in Presentations. Putting faces on the data makes it personal and difficult to discount. We have seen several districts use a “living bar graph” with great impact, asking students to stand on the stage and then having them sit down to show the number of students not succeeding.

In *The Heart of Change*, Kotter talks about the power of stories to dramatize data. Real stories about real people make data personal and its implications understood - dramatically.

Suggested Resources:

1] *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming our Schools* by Tony Wagner and colleagues of the Change Leadership Group, (2006) Jossey-Bass. See pages 28, 139-140, 145-147.

2] *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations* by John Kotter and Dan Cohen, (2002) Harvard Business School Press. Although this book is written primarily for leaders of business organizations, the key points from the introduction and chapter one help to surface new ways of thinking about how to get to “the heart” of change by creatively helping organizational members visualize and/or experience through the emotions why change is necessary. The article below (written for leaders in IT organizations) also helps to capture the ideas from the book.
<http://www.optimizemag.com/article/showArticle.jhtml?articleId=17700752>

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data is, by its very nature, personal and gets to the heart of those impacted. It also helps to uncover what is underneath the results represented by quantitative data. There are a number of ways to collect qualitative data. One of the most efficient ways is focus groups.

At their very core, focus groups provide a way to gather key qualitative data around student experiences, staff and parent perception, and current levels of urgency. If kept homogenous, patterns discerned across groups can become fairly reliable predictors of community perception or vivid descriptors of student satisfaction. Themes analyzed from focus groups, transcripts, or video-taped segments of focus groups become powerful data sources to create urgency when shown to other or expanded groups of stakeholders.

Different groupings to consider in collecting qualitative data include:

Focus Groups with Students

- Focus groups with current students - for internal and external use - disaggregated by (as examples)
 - High achieving students
 - Struggling students
 - Transition years
 - Second language learners
 - Socio-economic status
 - Alternative school students

- Focus groups with recent graduates or drop-outs, including those who have gone on to four year colleges, community college, vocational school, those who have done directly into the work place, sought GEDs, etc.

Focus groups with community members to clarify what graduates need to know and be able to do and how current graduates are not prepared. These might include local businesses and area college professors and admissions officers.

Suggested Resources:

Please refer to the Resource Appendix for suggested questions and protocols to use with focus groups.

The heart of any community engagement is conversation that leads to common ground, ideas, and futures. Options for these range from one-on-one, to small group conversations, to larger events that bring whole communities together and build momentum for change through the energy exhibited by a critical mass. What is important in any of these is that people feel as though their voice matters and that the purpose for the conversation is authentic.

Which Process for Which Purpose?

In considering which forums will be most effective to meet the purpose you've identified, we offer the following guidelines:

- If you are collecting data to understand current understandings, attitudes, or assumptions, we suggest small groupings that are homogenous. This enables you to understand what differences may exist across stakeholder groups.
- If your community has historically not been involved in schools, we recommend that you initially create groupings of individuals that are as like as possible, so as to enhance participants' comfort and willingness to converse. This is especially important in communities that are ethnically diverse, or for families who speak limited or no English.
- If you are working to build urgency for change, you may want to *begin* by working with internal and external communities separately, especially if your community has not traditionally talked across stakeholder groups. The implications for teachers and administrators are significant and different than those for external community members. These conversations are best begun in environments that are as non-threatening as possible.
- Even if you begin with homogenous focus groups or one-on-one interviews, it will be difficult to create real understanding and urgency for change or a shared commitment to continued improvement without sharing perspectives across stakeholder groups. At some point, you will need to facilitate the heterogeneous conversations that begin the real process of transformation and improvement.

In suggesting various forums for these conversations, we turn again to focus groups, as we find them to be effective not just for data collection, but in bridging perspectives, experiences, and to create shared commitment to sustained and systemic improvement.

Focus Groups

Heterogeneous focus groups offer an opportunity for participants to authentically engage around a problem in a process that often enables participants to explain their ideas, influence each other, and create some common ground. This can result in increased understanding and urgency for change, build commitment to sustained improvement, or create agreements on needed student supports and how they might be delivered. We like focus groups because they are small enough to be personal (6-8 participants are ideal); safe for participants through structured facilitation; flexible (they can be conducted individually or in forums of 30 or more); and most importantly, they are opportunities for authentic engagement. In all our work with focus groups, we have never had a participant leave feeling he or she had not had a unique and important experience. Most participants comment that they have never been listened to in this way before - and we can include staff as well as parents in this generalized statement.

We have run focus groups for:

1. Parents
2. Community members and social service providers
3. Teachers
4. Principals
5. Central Office Leadership and Other Personnel
6. Para-educators and Classified
7. Students, current and former

Focus groups can be facilitated with outside support or through internal resources. Some districts train teachers and administrators to facilitate parent and community focus groups. We have included suggested protocols and facilitator notes in the Resource Appendix, but effective questions will relate to the purposes you've identified, your local context, and speak to these general areas:

1. The important changes in our world that impact students, families, and teaching and learning
2. The most important things for our graduates to know and be able to do, and how we will know\
3. The citizenship values or behaviors we believe schools should reinforce
4. Our schools' strengths and weaknesses in light of these goals. The immediate priorities for improvement (You need to present your data here.)
5. The respective roles and responsibilities of educators, parents, students, business, and community members in the improvement process

Focus Group Forums

Focus Groups Forums allow you to hold a number of focus groups simultaneously and to share the results of each group through charting and participant viewing (often called gallery walks). We have seen focus group forums work with a few as three and as many as 30 different groups. Although the protocols used in focus group forums are similar to running a single focus group, this event is often begun with a presenter who speaks to how the world has changed and presents data on how well the district's students are being prepared for that world. The group conversations that follow respond to the information presented as individuals share reactions, insights, and then begin to consider the implications for students and their district (or school). We recommend "public recording" during these forums, with participant ideas and reactions hung throughout the room. In general, these forums do not seek to discover consensus and next steps; they instead begin the process within individuals of thinking differently about education and how it needs to change.

Large Scale Events

As you begin to see indicators that your internal and external communities exhibit urgency for change and improvement you will need to consider how to build consensus across stakeholder groups around a vision of continued and sustained improvement. If your stakeholder groups are not talking with each other by this point, you run the risk that different groups will be headed in opposite directions, resulting in continual dissatisfaction and blame. This is a time when students need the adults in their lives to be talking to one another, contemplating what needs to happen, when, and by whom.

There are a number of ways to engage internal and external community members in cross-conversations. One process that we will highlight here is typically applied to large groups (from 50 - 500 or more) but can easily be adapted to groups as small as 6. This process follows a basic change formula: highlighting dissatisfaction (to foster urgency for change) through data; creating a shared picture of a desired future; and determining next steps. The events themselves have several consistent components:

- People are seated in diverse groups of 5-6 people and given structured time to get to know one another. This activity provides practice in talking together as participants are asked to see the world through others' eyes. They also practice summarizing what they heard by charting similarities and differences among their individual stories.
- As information is shared about the district or school's data, participants are given time to process the information in their table groups by restating what they heard and sharing their reactions.
- They are asked to consider a desired future for students, working in table groups to find common ground among them.

- Participants are given authentic work to do: responding to proposed goals, offering ideas for next steps, creating new strategies, etc. (sometimes in role alike groups).
- They are given the opportunity review and to weigh in on others' ideas, through simple voting processes that are visible.

Outside of these steps, the variations are infinite, depending on the purpose identified by your leadership team.

With any of these processes, follow-through is critical. Ultimately, communities will only stay engaged and truly committed to sustained improvement when they feel their voice is taken seriously and that their time has been valued. Essential follow-through includes reporting how the leadership has made sense of the data gathered during the event or focus groups (or however you proceed), and what will happen next, including sponsorship and clarity around roles and responsibilities for action. It is also essential that the entire community has an opportunity to learn what has happened as a result of the planned actions - were they successful and did they impact students in the way they anticipated? And what's next?

Suggested Resource:

1] *Knowledge Works Community Conversation Workbook*

http://www.kwfdn.org/schools_communities/community_engagement/

Although the focus of the community conversations described in this workbook was on structural changes in schools, the overall process described here is very adaptable to any community conversation focus.

Tools for Effective Engagement

Building Supports for Students

Engaging parents and community members around supports for students outside of school is not a new idea or practice, to which any Title 1 school or district can attest. Most districts are doing this to some degree and many have launched comprehensive programs that target parental involvement.³ The research remains clear that parental and community involvement is a significant contributor to student success and, thus, essential to consider in the realm of community engagement.

Also familiar is the reality that educators play a significant role in this type of engagement, reaching out to families and others to support student needs. Learning opportunities outside of the school day (including homework), involvement in governance, parent education programs around academic support and parenting skills, etc. - all of these continue to be important and represent an essential partnership between families, communities, and schools on behalf of students. With the new challenge of graduating all kids ready for college, work, and citizenship, however, educators need to be strategic in thinking about how to ensure these supports for students without taking attention away from improving instruction. Rather, improving the instructional support of students at school must be partnered with learning supports for students outside of school.

This raises a challenge for educators as we look to focus and prioritize energies around ensuring all of our students are learning at high levels. We suggest your response be to include this lens as you investigate those elements that are most impacting *your* students' learning (what is the problem we're trying to solve?) and then consider how to involve your external communities in ways that do not divert your internal community's focus from instructional improvement. How might the involvement of parents and community members support this critical work and what are the logical connections that will best support students? What powerful instructional strategies will inherently lead to parental and community involvement? What outreach strategies are critical to support community confidence that all students can and should be prepared for college as an option of their choosing?

Student-led conferences and **senior culminating projects/ exhibitions** are two examples of formalized connections that bridge internal and external community members. These strategies provide educators and students the opportunity to engage parents and community members authentically in the

³ The Fresno Unified School District has a comprehensive plan for community and parent engagement that is captured on the following web site. A strong component of their overall plan for community engagement focuses on parental involvement.
<http://www.fresno.k12.ca.us/divdept/pec/pareng.html>

learning process. **Project-based learning** and **service learning** are powerful pedagogical practices that by their very nature provide key opportunities for students to engage with community members and their parents around their learning.

Also critical are parental involvement activities that highlight access to college and increase the visibility of this option for all students. In many communities, the majority of students would be the first in their family to attend college. Facilitating opportunities for families to investigate post-secondary options - through **college fairs**, meetings with admissions officers, visits to nearby campuses - supports a joint vision that bridges home and school - that of a more prosperous future for students. It creates a shared language of hope and opportunity, moving from “*if* you go to college” to “*when* you go to college.” Common aspirations and language between home and school go a long way toward supporting students’ academic goals; students reap a powerful base of support from which to launch their dreams.

Suggested Resources:

The research on parental and community involvement is tremendous and has been in place for decades. We will not attempt to provide a complete profile of the tools and processes for parent involvement, but rather highlight a few resources that link external communities to powerful instruction and to the new challenge of graduating all students ready for college, work, and citizenship.

1] Small Schools Project website—resources for family and community connections in support of student learning
<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/index.asp?siteloc=tool§ion=fcc-desc>

2] Small Schools Project website—resources for exhibitions
<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/index.asp?siteloc=tool§ion=portex>

3] Buck Institute website—resources on project-based learning
<http://www.bie.org/index.php>

4] *What Kids Can Do, Inc.* (WKCD) is a national not-for-profit organization founded in 2001 for the purpose of making public the voices and views of adolescents. On its website, WKCD documents young people's lives, learning, and work, and their partnerships with adults both in and out of school. WKCD also collaborates with students around the country on books, curricula, and research to expand current views of what constitutes challenging learning and achievement. www.whatkidscando.org

5] *GEAR UP* A federally-funded grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. The program employs partnerships committed to serving and

accelerating the academic achievement of cohorts of students through their high school graduation.

Their resource page leads to other links that contain information about GEAR UP grantees, programs upon which the GEAR UP program was modeled, and strategies for encouraging high-risk middle- and high-school students to prepare for college.

<http://www.ed.gov/programs/gearup/resources.html>

Although we would never describe the content of this guide as simple, we recognize that the real challenge to any initiative is in its implementation. It is far easier to write about community engagement than to actually engage communities! Your work is ahead of you as you think through your specific challenges, consider what needs to be addressed and in what order, and plan to implement community engagement practices that contribute significantly to student success. As you do this, we offer a few additional considerations that may be relevant to your community.

Addressing Diversity

It is hard to imagine a district that does not experience the challenges and opportunities of a diverse population. The challenges of multiple first languages, as one example, can seem overwhelming without clear strategies in place and the resources for implementation. While this guide was not designed to address the continuing issues of resource allocation, we can offer a few general guidelines for addressing diversity. In addition, we note some promising practices of two school districts designed to address this challenge.

Limited English Proficiency. This is potentially the most overt and resource-dependent challenge faced in community engagement as there is no substitute for adequate translation by those who are well-qualified. Beware of the nuances not apparent in verbatim translations from English to another language. We have seen examples of poorly translated materials that are equated with lack of respect and often result in greater misunderstandings than if the translations had not been available.

We suggest asking parents who do not speak English about their preferred method of translation (such as headphones or using a side-by-presenter/ translator) to see what works best for them. In small group conversations, you can include a bilingual participant who is willing to translate. Some parents prefer having their students act as translators.

In any event, be sure to increase the time allotted for a focus group or forum when translation is required by about .75 and to ask participants to pause frequently for translation. Some limited-English speakers are comfortable in heterogeneous groupings; others are not. Ask them and follow their lead. The goal is to get them talking and engage them in the issues.

Disengaged Parents. Few districts have not known this problem: parents who were unsuccessful in school themselves are difficult to engage and tend to stay away from school settings. The reality is that many parents become school-age

again when they walk through school doors as they are flooded with memories, good and bad. We suggest engaging them in arenas that are more comfortable; if they won't come to you, go to them. Outreach efforts can take place in neighborhood churches, community centers, living rooms.... Once relationships are established, previously disengaged parents may feel more comfortable on school grounds and mixed stakeholder-group conversation. Until then, it is most important to engage them in any way that you can.

If the parent population of your district is economically bifurcated, you may wonder whether to try to separate focus groups. These groups may separate out naturally; if parents are willing to come to school for a conversation, you probably do not need to structure additional homogeneity. This does not include separating parents whose children are performing differently if you are in the process of collecting data around parent perception as it relates to student performance.

Some districts are developing the capacity of volunteers to effectively reach out to various community groups (particularly ethnic groups) as community liaisons. These individuals identify and mobilize community leaders, engage parents in the change process, and build necessary partnerships to support all students graduating ready for work and college. Community liaisons must not only understand the culture of the various parent and community groups that they are working with, but speak the language as well.

The Highline School District is developing "community outreach experts." We will have an opportunity to learn more from them as they implement this strategy, its challenges, and effectiveness. Fresno Unified School District's parent and community engagement plan utilizes "community relations liaisons." Their webpage provides a full description of these roles.
<http://www.fresno.k12.ca.us/divdept/pec/commrel.html>

Facing Push Back

Sometimes more intimidating than diversity are anticipated challenges from parents who push back against any changes that alter a familiar landscape, one that most likely brought them success in their adult lives. These individuals - often the same ones relied upon for political and financial support - may perceive that the concept of all kids graduating ready for college threatens available opportunities for their children.

These are admittedly tough conversations, but we can draw on the experience of others to offer these suggestions:

- Work with your Board - ensuring your own political capital before you begin and developing a joint strategy.
- Be the initiator of the conversation (rather than the defender) and build upon a reservoir of support that came from less controversial experiences.

- Polish your active listening skills and be sure to validate any emotions or fears that surface. Deal with concerns by addressing them head on, working to suspend judgment, accept differences, and find common ground by asking why.
- Lay the problem on the table as an issue to investigate jointly. Rather than confronting the “college ready” issue, consider the concept of all kids being “juror ready⁴.”
- Finally, do not work alone. Issues surrounding children are always emotional; so is the professional and personal integrity of educators and parents. Collegial or supervisory support is a critical element of comfort and willingness to venture into these conversations.

Starting Small

In *Leading Change*, Kotter discusses the value of orchestrating short-term wins as a strategy to build trust and confidence in a new direction. Quick wins keep people from getting discouraged and support efforts that extend over a long period of time. Because respectful relationships take time to develop, short-term wins can build the trust necessary for the long haul. Equally important, then is to guard the trust and goodwill developed as it is easy to lose and hard to reestablish.

What might a short-term win look like in community engagement? Focus groups that leave people feeling heard and respected are one example. Periodic events (such as college fairs or focus group forums) that begin with a few skeptical individuals and grow as the practice of authentic engagement spreads across the community are another. Sharing disaggregated data with staff that gives them information about student performance in their school is a powerful and necessary first step that supports engagement. Start small, keep them simple, and record your progress so that you can celebrate your successes and move ahead.

⁴ Tony Wagner frames “juror-ready” in this way: *Imagine you have been accused of a horrible crime that you didn’t commit. As you think about the skills needed by a jury of your peers, what would you want them to know and be able to do (problem solve, weigh evidence, think critically....)?*

Defining short term wins necessitates clarity around what success looks like for any endeavor. We strongly suggest that you begin all community engagement planning with a clear vision of success in your district. Knowing where you are headed, *along with* data that illustrates your current reality supports the need for action and will point to the most effective data and tools required to accomplish the purposes you've defined. We find, however, that often progress is only measured by student performance, and skips an important step of knowing if the strategy employed to reach those targets is effective. While we agree that student performance is the ultimate goal, assessing strategy effectiveness offers early warnings of plans gone awry, needs for refinement, or direction to expand the effort.

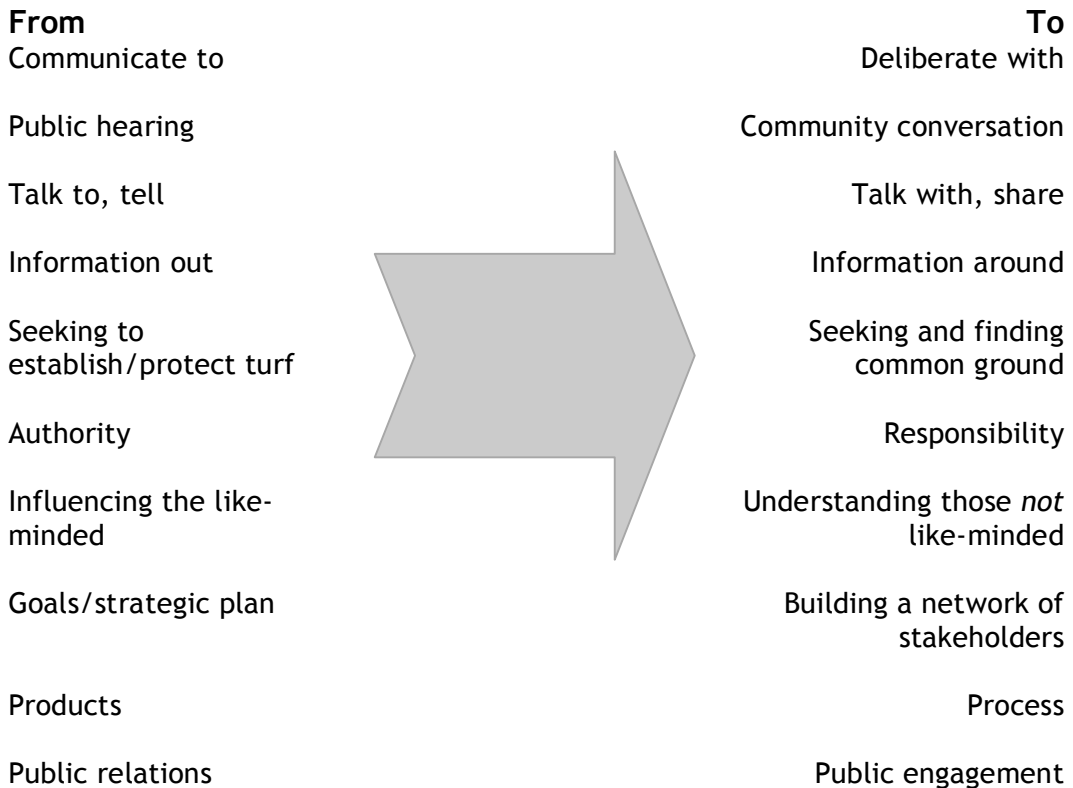
In determining benchmarks, ask yourselves:

1. What do we expect to have happen as a result of _____. How does this link to the problem(s) and purpose(s) we established?
2. How will we know success? What might we see, hear, experience? What should be different and with whom?
3. What data will we collect around this and when? Who is responsible?
4. How will we communicate these results and to whom?

Successful Implementation

A Vision of Engagement

As we have learned from our experience in improving instruction, it is always useful to have an exemplar to work from, a vision of something we might hope to produce ourselves. We imagine this may be true for you as you contemplate different ways of engaging your communities around success for all students. And so we leave with you a vision of engagement - one that is sufficiently general to adapt to your local context, but specific enough to articulate the difference between public relations (as we noted at the beginning of this guide) and real engagement of your community - your educators, your parents, your students, and the world that surrounds them. This continuum, established by the Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education,⁵ highlights these differences and offers a promising vision of true engagement.



⁵ Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change: A Report of the Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education
<http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publications/civicpubs.html#local>

Listening to Student Voices: What Schools Must Do to Succeed

Sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and conceived and moderated by Tony Wagner, author of Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools.

"Listening to Student Voices: What Schools Must Do to Succeed" is a professionally shot and edited video, which contains both a five minute and a 20 minute clip from three different high school student focus groups.

Advanced Placement students, academically struggling students, and recent drop-outs and graduates discuss similar questions: the strengths and weaknesses of their school, what needs to be changed to improve learning, and what they see as good teaching. In all three groups, there are similar themes, powerfully expressed: students' need for closer relationships with caring adults in school and their hunger for more relevant and challenging classes. The videos are a very useful tool for initiating faculty and parent discussions on the need for change in the American Comprehensive High School. They also make a compelling case about the value of including the students' "voice" in discussions related to school change.

Available FREE.

To order: please e-mail your name, school, address and phone number to info@smallschoolsproject.com at info@smallschoolsproject.com or call (206) 812-3160

*The handbook that accompanies the video is particularly useful.

Leslie Rennie-Hill (Director of Program Initiatives at the Portland Schools Foundation) and colleagues developed a useful protocol of questions for student focus groups as they were helping schools develop planning grants for small learning community work.

Ground Rules

1. There are no wrong answers, only different points of view.
2. I'll be asking one person to talk at a time
3. If I see that someone has not had a chance to speak, I may ask for your input.
4. Because we have several questions to cover, I may hurry us along at some points during the discussion.
5. We ask you to respect the confidentiality of everyone here; please do your part to make sure this information shared today does not leave the room.

Focus Group Questions

- Name one thing that is important to you about this school
- What are some adjectives that describe this school?
- What do you think is high quality academic work and have you ever done any? What did you do? Why do you think you decided to work so hard? Do you think your definition of high quality work is the same as the one used by teachers here at school?
- Think of a time when you were really struggling at this school—academically or social. What support did you need? Did you get it? Not get it?
- Do you see a connection between success at school and success in life after school? Why or why not?
- If you could change one thing about your school to improve the chances of success here for all students what would you do?
- We really want to understand students' ideas and experiences about their school. Are we asking the right questions? Are there other questions we should be asking?