

# Acting Locally, Changing Globally

How to Identify and Solve Dominant Education Challenges One School at a Time

This paper explores the challenges inherent in the current system of policy creation and action, and presents a structure for addressing these dominant issues that takes into account the nuances and priorities of the local community.



## Introduction

While debate rages on about a wide range of issues at the highest levels of education policy, the real stakeholders – parents, administrators and students – often feel left out of the discussion. The irony is that these issues are felt most deeply right within the local community. There is a disconnect between where these issues are getting attention and where something can actually be done about them. An unfortunate casualty is the already threatened school/parent relationship.

This paper explores the challenges inherent in the current system of policy creation and action, and presents a structure for addressing these dominant issues that takes into account the nuances and priorities of the local community. Through this process of Whole Community Learning, parents become more actively engaged, buy-in to and support of local administration increases, and the education system as a whole responds more effectively to local, real-life priorities.

Throughout North America and likely in every other part of the western world, dialog about the nature and objectives of primary and secondary education is on a constant simmer. As the economy ebbs and flows, as technology introduces new opportunities (Internet in the classroom) and challenges (smartphones in the schoolyard), and as first-time parents get introduced to their local school system, the opinions, ideas and expectations about education get revisited. The policy debates seem to rage the fiercest – or at least get the most media attention – at the highest levels of administration, namely at the provincial and state government levels. Occasionally we hear news from the district level, and less often from the local school level. It is a virtual guarantee that people somewhere are actively engaged in rousing dialog about a wide range of issues confronting their education system today.

Some of the most active and well publicized discussions focus on physical and mental health, student motivation, technology and parent participation. Here is a brief recap of these major issues.

## Physical Health

The topic of childhood health has long been a contentious one for education systems. From meal plans to snacks to physical education, this topic touches every single student and parent. At a philosophical level, the notion of responsibility is raised; are parents ultimately responsible for the health of

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their children, and their attitudes toward eating and exercise? What role do schools play in supporting or encouraging proper habits? Should public policy even enter this debate, or should it be left to the kitchens and backyards of individual families?

Although the imprint varies from region to region and district to district, we are already a long way down the path of public policy involvement, be it in the form of hot lunch programs, mandatory physical education or parent-approved vending machines. Once physical health is a part of the local school system, it will always rank as a contentious subject for policy makers, administrators and parents. Today, the major issues in physical health include child obesity, sugar and sodium content in food provided or distributed by schools, and physical activity in the school curriculum.

### **Mental Health**

We are in an era of unprecedented enlightenment when it comes to mental health issues in our schools. From special needs and learning disabilities to more nuanced issues like bullying and sexual orientation, schools are now a prime testing ground for the resilience and mental fortitude of our youth. Some of these topics were non-issues a generation ago, but they are all too real today. Whether they like it or not, administrators and educators are increasingly called upon to provide an accepting and nurturing environment for students. Many fantastic programs have emerged in response, to the point where even the largest public schools are light years ahead of where they were just 10 or even 5 years ago. In Finland, the KiVa anti-bullying program was launched in 2007, and has shown strong results<sup>1</sup>. Says Todd Little, Kansas University professor of psychology, about KiVa: “This is one of the first interventions we’re seeing with effects that are impressive and pervasive.” Whether the focus is on bullying, self-esteem or socialization, it is hard to imagine the topic of our children’s mental well-being ever receding as a central educational theme.

### **Student Motivation**

It is a common refrain that children today are ‘growing up’ faster than any previous generation. Whether this situation is caused by a heightened sense of competition among parents or by a society in which grown-up issues are more public and more accessible than before, or both, the fact remains that students today are likely under a great deal more pressure to learn and develop than they have been in the past. This can be a very heavy burden to

carry for such young and inexperienced members of our community.

Keeping students motivated under these conditions has become increasingly challenging. Student motivation has always been an important topic of discussion, particularly at the senior high school level when students begin acting upon – or at least thinking about – what they want to do when they grow up. Over the years, this ‘pressure’ to establish one’s career has trickled down the age range, and has spurred changes to both curriculum and support services that are designed to help students identify opportunities and obtain the skills they need to achieve their goals. From traditional guidance counseling to more subtle issues like classroom inspiration, work ethic, independent learning and individual education plans, schools continue to evolve in their approach to keeping students motivated and focused.

### **Technology**

Technology has been a perpetual topic of conversation amongst educators and families long before the first Macintosh made its way into the classroom. The landscape today is immensely different, to put it mildly, but the core of the discussion hasn’t really changed all that much; what place does technology have in the classroom and what role does the school play in preparing students for the digital workplace? The concept of ‘Bring-your-own-device’ is a new one for schools that still haven’t fully figured out what to do about smartphones, Facebook, Nexopia, texting and other applications of technology that are finding their way into schools.

Some of the most meaningful discussions being held today are about figuring out how to help students handle the information overload caused by modern technology, how to make it work for rather than against them. Whereas the legacy of today’s curriculum has its roots in the industrial age when the world needed better factory workers, today’s information age requires a significantly different type of *knowledge* worker. As the education level of parents rises over time, so does their desire for schools to better prepare children for what lies ahead.

### **Parent Buy-in and Embracement**

Parent participation in education underlies all of the issues raised above. The manner and method of parent participation is itself a very touchy subject. Parent Advisory Councils and Parent-Teacher Associations have

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been around for decades, and are perhaps the most common means of integrating – or at least discovering – parent objectives relating to the form and outcome of their children’s education. Every three years (in BC, frequency varies from region to region) communities have the opportunity to elect or re-elect school trustees, who bridge the gap between the community and the local school board. While there appear to be mechanisms for parent buy-in, actual participation rates are low and declining (voter turnout for the 2011 municipal elections in British Columbia was below 30%<sup>2</sup>). The important question – and the one that lies at the heart of this paper – is whether or not the current methods of parent involvement are working. Are they enabling real discussion? Do the discussions reflect the viewpoint of the parent population? Are they tackling the big issues mentioned above in meaningful, progressive ways?

### **Where is the Right Place for Discussion?**

The breadth of topics mentioned above – and these are but a sampling of issues under debate – is enough to intimidate even the most seasoned policy maker or educator, let alone parents. Yet they resonate loudly in virtually every household with school-age children. Addressing them seems to take more time than it should, not because of denial or a lack of understanding, but because there seems to be a disconnect between where these issues are discussed and where they are most felt. Ask any parent and they will likely tell you that it is absolutely vital that education policy addresses these issues, but at the same time the wheels of policy move too slowly for their liking. Educators and administrators at the local level will nod cynically in agreement.

Take for example the Province of British Columbia’s initiative for inviting stakeholder and public contributions to the future of its education plan. The BC Education Plan ([www.bcedplan.ca](http://www.bcedplan.ca)) is an attempt to devise a “more flexible, dynamic and adaptable” education system that will “better prepare students”. The online initiative follows a simple format: raise a question and invite comments. Topics span the full range of education issues, from reading to vocational training to teacher empowerment to web design. It appears to be an appropriate, relevant and well-directed initiative, one that has garnered decent support from citizens and students. Or is it?

At first glance, seeing that there are 647 comments on one topic, 407 on another and 569 on yet another is evidence that people are talking and sharing. However, this needs to be put in proper context. As a publicly

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accessible platform, there are inherent flaws: anyone from anywhere can add a comment. Your cousin in Vancouver can comment, but so can a total stranger in Tokyo, someone who isn't necessarily tied to the outcome and whose opinion shouldn't really count. Second, even if participation was limited to residents of BC only, the number of responses must be considered in light of the population. As of the last census in 2011, British Columbia had a population of 4, 573, 321 people. Garnering 647 responses from this base seems hardly a representative sample upon which to base something as central as education policy.

Could it be that this is not the right level at which to have this discussion? If it is, will it be straightforward enough to translate into policy, and then into action at the local school level? Does action need to occur in every school to the same degree? For example, it is not hard to imagine schools from different districts (even from different neighbourhoods within a district) having markedly different programs for reading and vocational training. The real question is: are these programs meeting the requirements of the parent community?

The fact is that while these issues are macro in size and scope, they vary in degree when you get down to the local community level. For example, while childhood obesity is a national concern, when it comes to schools, each community feels it in different ways, and some more than others. It follows that taking action about childhood obesity is best left to the school, not the Department of Education. The same can be said of all the issues raised above; talk at the national or even regional level is cheap and more emphasis should be placed on our own community.

The goal here is not to undermine or discredit the discussions taking place at the highest policy levels. Rather, the goal is to identify how best to turn policy into action. The belief is that real results are best achieved by empowering school and local education leaders to engage with their local communities, to find out what concerns them most and open a creative and meaningful dialog designed to achieve resolution inspired by local priorities and local contributions.

As if this weren't compelling enough, the reality in many school districts across North America is that when a significant change needs to occur, the district is obligated by law to show evidence of public consultation. It's all well and good that debate is encouraged by top-level education authorities, but it is ultimately the local school district that is held accountable by legal

obligation to engage with the community. It is not as if legal pressure is necessary, because if we agree that debate is more relevant at the local level, then the point is moot. What education policy makers should be doing is making sure the school districts have the tools and means by which to engage effectively with its community.

### **Community First**

In the past two decades, much research has been conducted to study the impact of parent involvement on the academic success of their children. There is accepted evidence demonstrating that the quality of links between teachers and families and between communities and schools influences children's academic success (Eccles & Harold, 1996). When parents and teachers connect, students tend to do better academically and socially. Parental involvement in a child's education improves not only test scores and behaviour it also increases the likelihood of going on to post-secondary education. Parental involvement also benefits the school by increasing teacher morale and improving the reputation of the school and education system at large. (Henderson & Berla, 1994, p.1).

The issue encompasses more than just academic performance. A school is also a social scene and an athletic venue, so the concerns and needs of parents and stakeholders extend beyond academics, as evidenced by the range of topics presented above.

If there is indeed a disconnect between where hot educational issues are being discussed and where action is really needed, it follows that a better way of identifying, embracing and acting upon major (and minor) issues is needed. If student performance truly improves when the local community – parents and other stakeholders – are more actively engaged in education matters, it follows that keeping communities engaged is of prime importance.

It all seems quite logical if you are a parent or administrator: each school contends with different issues to differing degrees, so a blanket policy created at the state/provincial or even district level runs the risk of missing the mark when it comes to the local community. When parents feel that policies and programs do not sufficiently address local issues or priorities, they will “check out” of the process. As proxy evidence of this, one need only to look at voter turnout at election time to understand what happens when the community feels misrepresented or powerless to effect change.



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The dominant model for community engagement – while well intended – actually has the whole process backwards. Administrators decide then engage. They decide and then defend. In business parlance, they tell and then they sell. School districts decide what the community wants for its children then sell the solution<sup>3</sup>. True community engagement is just the opposite. When the process is reversed it stands a much better chance of a) encouraging parents to participate, b) making them feel like they are making a deeper contribution, and c) earning the support and buy-in of the community.

One of the biggest roadblocks to participation that this new model of community-level engagement eliminates is the pre-determination of which questions need discussion. Whereas the current model is a top-down, authoritative model led by school administrators (under the occasional guidance from trustees and vociferous parents/parent groups) in which they initiate the conversation based on their own agenda, the proposed community-centred model is the opposite; the community itself is tasked with drawing up the list of hot topics based on its own immediate concerns. This isn't to suggest that administrators should not propose topics or pass along ones they feel are important. Rather, it is to suggest that a fundamental premise of community engagement is to jointly determine what is important. Administrators should engage the community in framing and then answering the questions at hand and then make appropriate decisions that draw on this collaborative effort. That shift in language and in actions makes all the difference.

Take for example the issue of parent embracement. Imagine a community where many parents had a negative experience with their own schooling. Contrast this with another community where the experience was more positive. While parents in the former community might have a harder time trusting education authorities and justifying getting involved, parents in the latter community are much more likely to buy into the system and take a personal interest in its affairs. So while the issue of embracement might indeed be a national one, it is the local community that will determine how important it is among all the other issues and opportunities.

For more research supporting the premise that local community engagement is better at tackling some of the other issues raised above, please refer to Appendix A.



There are jurisdictions that recognize the importance of local community engagement and execution. The Province of Ontario has a policy-backed program focused on “parent and community engagement and involvement in education” that began in 2005 (<http://www.parentinvolvement.ca/>). Local school boards and school councils receive funding from the provincial government for engaging parents in education. Strategies and ideas based on academic research are collected by the Parent Involvement Centre and disseminated to stakeholders at the local level. This is a strong example of effective local empowerment, complete with government funding to help it come to life.

Ultimately, every school district administrator and school principal recognizes that they are in service to the public. They want to make the right decisions based on good data, and they want positive, productive relations with their community. But there are limits to the current forms of community outreach. Let’s explore some of these limits.

### **Parent Advisory Committees**

Also known as PTA’s, Parent Advisory Committees (PAC) are volunteer-driven proxies for the local parent community. Most are governed by a professional non-profit management model complete with an elected board of directors, treasury and well-documented minutes. Every parent gets one vote, and any parent can run for a spot on the board. No parent would likely ever get turned away if they wanted to volunteer their time somehow.

The trouble with PAC’s is that there are no means of ensuring that the proxy is an accurate one. While the image of eager housewives meeting in a classroom after school to plan the next fundraiser has long been replaced with a more practical reality, the PAC still relies on the willingness and availability of parents to function. The PAC is susceptible to hijacking by more vocal or active parents, for better or for worse. None of this is intended to disparage this channel of parent engagement – without the PAC there probably would be no effective means of communicating with the principal as a group, not just as a random bunch of individual parents. But the reality is the PAC has its weaknesses in serving as an effective proxy for the parent community.

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### Trustee Meetings

Politics aside, trustee meetings have other shortcomings. No doubt elected trustees are genuinely motivated by their role, putting skin in the game where most other parents wouldn't dare tread. Trustees are a vital part of the check-and-balance system that holds education administrators accountable to the public. That being said, there is no widespread expectation that trustees can play an active, engaged, regular role in the goings-on in the school district. The role of the trustee implies a higher-altitude perspective and involvement, which necessarily means many of the local hot topics fly under their radar. The trustee is an important proxy for the local community at this high level, but does not have the regular in-the-weeds involvement to be a strong representative on all issues.

### A Proposed Solution Framework: Whole Community Learning

Engagement at the local community level is the goal, but how to achieve it? If PACs and trustees do not fully deliver, where else can schools and parents turn? What options are there to inspire meaningful and creative dialog between parents and local school administrators?

To begin to answer this challenge, we propose a fundamental shift in how we think about engagement. What we are really after is mutual awareness, understanding and collaboration at the community level. This can only be achieved through familiarity and ongoing dialog, when all invested parties take the time and effort to learn from each other and share what they learn. In this sense it is no different than any negotiation or interpersonal interaction – in order to succeed, one must learn as much as possible about the other party. But unlike negotiations where equal mutual gain is rarely the objective, learning is about exploring common ground in order to find optimal solutions, not about discovering weaknesses that can be exploited. When we consider locally optimized education systems as the goal shared by educators, parents, staff and other stakeholders – the *whole* local community – learning seems far more beneficial than just basic engagement.

Consider the example of the BC Ministry of Education's online initiative outlined above. How much learning does it afford? Is there any meaningful depth of mutual awareness and understanding? How local is it? By all accounts, it looks a lot more like basic engagement than real learning, and seems to be barely connected at all to local communities.

Let's answer the questions raised at the beginning of this section starting with a discussion on what whole community learning looks like.

“ *Whole Community Learning is a method of resolving challenges by building mutually beneficial group-learning capacity on a local level.* ”

Whole community learning is a method of resolving challenges by building mutually beneficial group-learning capacity on a local level. In this context, the community is defined narrowly to encompass a school and its parents, teachers and staff. This definition supports the premise that this is where the scope and importance of the ‘hot issues’ is most relevant, that this is where action needs to be tailored in order to meet the unique needs of the community.

There are many advantages to an approach that emphasizes community learning. For starters, there is a reduction in the risk of polarizing stakeholders. When people interact more, they often discover they have more in common. They can be more tolerant of different perspectives and are more likely to share common goals when it comes to education. Contrast this to a regional or national level, where stakeholders are less likely to have meaningful mutual interests beyond the obvious.

Whole community learning is also more likely to derive mutual benefit. When we interact regularly with the same group, human nature dictates that we are less likely to try to take advantage of others, and more likely to seek out common ground, common gain. Even if we are driven by self-interest, it is more likely that our own interests align more closely with those within our immediate community.

One final advantage to whole community learning is implicit in the definition provided above (compared to engagement). Since learning implies openness and two-way communication, there is ample opportunity for feedback and sharing. The learning process therefore allows all participants to see their unique contributions to the challenges they face. If you have ever taken a survey but were never exposed to its results or impact, then you understand the difference between engagement and learning. Only the learning process keeps you in the loop from start to finish, as it a fundamental principle of learning to constantly share and apprise.

### **Five Components of Successful Whole Community Learning**

Whole community learning needs the right mechanism to produce results. Such a mechanism must enable local administrators to connect with the local community through a platform for learning that benefits all stakeholders. It must also facilitate making decisions so discussion can turn into action. It should include the following five components:

1. **Diverse and inclusive participation:** the more participants, the more can be shared and the more there is to learn. Diversity is important to introduce

## 5 Components of Whole Community Learning

1. Diverse and inclusive participation
2. Independent thought
3. Tools for converging information
4. A method for evaluating the thoughts of others
5. A clear way to articulate resolutions

- thoughts, ideas and perspectives that might not be apparent to a homogeneous group.
2. Independent thought: people must be allowed to contribute without influence and bias from others, or from being drowned out by the loudest voice in the room. Similarly, bias built into the questions is one of the greatest sins of surveys, and must be avoided. Anonymity is equally important so people feel comfortable sharing their views, which otherwise might go undisclosed.
  3. Tools for converging information meaningfully: broad participation is desirable, as are unfettered discussions. But in order to have an impact, thoughts and ideas must be organized into meaningful 'buckets'. This does not refer to labeling along a spectrum from 'good' to 'bad', but rather it means providing a mechanism through which similar ideas can be grouped so that participants can begin to see where the common ground appears, where solutions with broader support begin to take shape. This is an important learning process, fundamental to the notion of learning vs. engagement. In the latter, there is little evidence of similarity beyond statistical evidence, and rarely if ever, any visibility into emerging solutions.
  4. A method for evaluating the thoughts of others: Akin to converging ideas and keeping in mind the first criterion's focus on inclusivity, there must be a way for participants to 'chime in' on thoughts and ideas not their own. As the expression goes, no one has a monopoly on good ideas. Similarly, if we are to strive for learning, we must be open to hearing and potentially adopting the perspectives of others.
  5. A clear way to articulate resolutions: Ultimately, the goal is to let the most effective solutions bubble up to the surface through dialog and discourse. Maintaining transparency throughout is vital, so participants can see how their individual perspectives play out and connect to the greater goal, the thoughts of others in their community and ultimately the solution.

When a community learning model for education is built with these criteria in mind, the result will be an active and responsive process that is highly tuned in to the unique needs of the local community and its stakeholders. It will yield home-grown solutions to issues both large and small. Such a model will succeed in identifying and then solving the dominant challenges faced by our education system for several reasons: not only does it take the issues down to street level, letting the local community determine their scope and priority,

but it also includes all key stakeholders in deriving solutions, thereby increasing the likelihood of success and buy-in.

Thoughtexchange is The Group Insight Platform™ that brings an empowered community together to work toward common solutions. Collaborative leaders use Thoughtexchange to hear the community's thoughts and surface and develop the best ideas. Stakeholders share their thoughts, star what others say, and discover what matters most. Leveraging the best and most effective aspects of crowdsourcing and the principles of collaborative negotiation, the Thoughtexchange platform is used for community engagement, collaborative planning, border restructuring, facilities review and more. For more information on how to engage your community, visit [www.thoughtexchange.com](http://www.thoughtexchange.com) email [info@thoughtexchange.com](mailto:info@thoughtexchange.com) or call 1-800-361-9027.

<sup>1</sup> "Researchers Push to Import Top Anti-Bullying Program to US Schools", <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/08/110817135358.htm>

2 Civic Info BC, <http://www.civicinfo.bc.ca/302n.asp?newsid=4449&r=4449&r=4448&r=4447&r=4446&r=4445&r=4444&r=4442&r=4441&r=4440>

3 And the Survey Says: The Case for Community Engagement Paul A. Johnson - Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership 2009. <http://jel.sagepub.com/content/early/2009/12/23/1555458909352372.abstract?patientinform-links=yes&legid=spjel;1555458909352372v1>



## Appendix A

### Research Supporting the Effectiveness of Community Learning

“Bullying Prevention In Schools”, Public Safety, Government of Canada  
<http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cp/res/bully-eng.aspx>. Refer to section 2.2 for the discussion on “The whole-school approach”.

“Obesity in Canada – Opportunities for Intervention”, <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/oic-oac/interv-eng.php>. Refer to the section on community-based interventions as part of a three-pronged approach including individual and public-policy level interventions.

Best-practice recommendations for reducing obesity and related chronic disease risk in children and youth, US National Library of Medicine.  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16371076>

“A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement”, National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, 2002.  
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Family Involvement, Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education. <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement>

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