# Five Criteria for Effective Stakeholder Engagement in Education

Discover the key criteria to effective stakeholder engagement in education

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### Introduction

Stakeholder engagement in education is a well-understood concept among education leaders across North America. A great many school districts embrace a popular model for parental involvement that places strong emphasis on collaborative decision making and communication.[1] Efforts take on many shapes, and while they may not always be easy or appear successful, few education leaders today would disagree that involving key stakeholders in the creation and evaluation of education policies is sound administrative practice. Perhaps this perspective stems from a bygone era when schoolhouses were small and localized, professional administration did not exist and parents directly influenced – if not unilaterally determined – what appeared on the curriculum. Today, it may be due to the more politicized and accountable environment in which schools now exist. Regardless of where it comes from, stakeholder engagement plays a vital role in effective leadership in education.

That being said, what it looks like and how it is being accomplished is changing dramatically thanks to new approaches that better ensure success.

### What is – and what isn't – Stakeholder Engagement

While education professionals and mavens define stakeholder engagement in a number of ways, for the sake of this discussion we will define it as an ongoing system through which education leaders meaningfully connect with, learn from and communicate with individuals and groups with vested interests in education. This includes parents, teachers, students and staff, and can be extended to include taxpayers. This definition emphasizes that engagement must be deliberate and systematic, and stakeholders should have an influence throughout the decision making process, not just at the end.

Described as a cycle, engagement moves through four phases:

**Planning:** determining what decisions will be affected, who the participants are, establishing the background and settling on the right questions to ask

**Participation:** gathering of input and ideas, learning from each other and setting priorities

**Analysis:** consolidating all the input in order to establish a relevant course of action

**Sharing:** encapsulating and distributing results to relevant, interested parties

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Even though it refers to a broad group, stakeholder engagement is NOT about group decision making. This would undermine the role, expertise and wisdom of education professionals and leaders, not to mention result in a potentially fatal crippling of the entire process. Rather, stakeholder engagement is about ensuring that the ideas and concerns of all relevant stakeholders are well represented throughout a more collaborative and transparent decision making process. The difference is not insignificant; shared decision making requires consensus, whereas collaborative engagement emphasizes participation while acknowledging each party's role in the process.

This isn't to suggest that school administrators should be reaching out to stakeholders every time they need to make a decision; such a practice would be cumbersome and fraught with delay, to say the least. Yet there are issues where resolution depends on successful consultation, including but not limited to:

- Asset use (school closures, property sales, etc.)

- School boundary/catchment revisions

- School feedback and parent engagement

- Innovation planning

- Strategic planning

With this perspective in mind, a quick review of many of the traditional methods of stakeholder engagement in education reveals obvious shortcomings. For example, parent councils, while well entrenched, suffer from declining participation and less-than-perfect representation. Their composition and influence varies greatly over time. For their part, elected school trustees are by definition politically motivated, even if they do carry the best of intentions. Their oversight provides an important check-and-balance especially around financial matters, but as elected officials they face a difficult challenge understanding and responding to a diverse range of interests that may or may not accurately represent stakeholder opinion. For trustees, engagement is a critical step in fulfilling the obligations of their office.

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**Why Pursue Stakeholder Engagement?**

In another paper, we explore how many of the challenges facing our education systems are best dealt with at the local – school and district – level. The reasoning here is simply that while issues may be national or even global in scale, their relevance and impact vary widely from community to community. Local stakeholders are in the best position to set priorities and develop solutions that best meet their unique needs. If this reasoning is sound, then it follows that a reliable engagement process is required to discover these priorities and cultivate appropriate solutions.

Whatever your role as an education leader, you typically face three options when it comes to making important decisions: you can choose inaction; you can trust your own instincts or those of your closest advisors; or you can reach out to your stakeholders to see where their interests lie. Inaction is the easiest solution in the short-term, but it really just delays the inevitable and exposes you to personal career risk. Trusting yourself or your inner circle is expeditious and often wise, but in some cases you end up making unreasonable or inaccurate assumptions, and you can still put yourself at risk if you make the wrong call. Engaging your stakeholders is the most time-consuming, but it almost completely eliminates personal risk and comes with the extra reward of being labelled 'a strong communicator' and 'a friend of the customer'. In a field such as education, where stakeholders can get emotional and public scrutiny is high, the risk of making certain decisions without effective engagement is too high to entertain (and the fact that you're reading this paper implies that you agree).

**Five Benefits of Stakeholder Engagement**

When done right, stakeholder engagement yields specific benefits including:

• Better insight into stakeholders' views and opinions

• The ability to make big decisions more quickly and at reduced cost

• Greater buy-in from stakeholders, who played a larger role throughout the decision making process

• Stronger likelihood of positive outcome thanks to access to more ideas and broader awareness of the decision made

• Greater trust for education leaders among stakeholders.

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**Common Obstacles to Successful Stakeholder Engagement**

Engagement is not always a simple proposition, and there are several ways that it can go wrong, including:

- Unreasonable time frames. For consultation to be meaningful and well received, it has to happen before and during the decision making process, not just after.

- Limits on participation. While parent councils have deep roots and the best of intentions, they rely on live meetings – typically on school afternoons or nights – limiting how many parents can attend. Every school has also witnessed how the impact of parent councils ebbs and flows based on its leadership and its capacity to inspire participation.

- Manipulation or undue influence. If it's always the same twenty people showing up at parent council meetings, the discussions cannot be deemed representative. These twenty people will guide the proceedings according to their own needs (or the needs of the one or two powerful voices that always seem to dominate the meetings), but not necessarily according to the interests of the majority of stakeholders.

- External Dependencies. If you have to rely on other people (IT, consultants, etc.) to carry out your engagement effort, then you may not be doing it right. Fact is you don't usually have enough time or energy to wait for someone else who may not share your priorities, to help you.

- Opacity. When your chosen system of engagement doesn't let participants see what others are saying – offering them an opportunity to learn new perspectives and potentially change their minds – you are not realizing the full potential of engagement. This is often the fatal flaw of surveys – once the question is asked, results are rarely if ever shared with respondents, and there is no opportunity to change answers if they like what someone else had to say.

**When Engagement Goes Wrong**

When an engagement system hits one or more of these obstacles, the resulting consequences can be just as serious as those you might endure had you not tried to engage at all. For example:

**Alienation and anger:** When dialog and communication fail, alienation and distrust on the part of stakeholders are not far behind. Parents can easily feel that school officials are out of touch or operating in a vacuum. From

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> *How much time, energy and money could have been saved if school leadership had reached out more effectively, right from the start?*

school closures and consolidations to alternative scheduling, there are countless high-profile examples of decisions taken at the board level that trigger outrage by parents and community members. These decisions occasionally get reversed as a result of stakeholder response. It begs the question: how much time, energy and money could have been saved if school leadership had reached out more effectively, right from the start?

**Penalties:** In many jurisdictions, school districts are required to demonstrate to government that they made reasonable efforts to reach out and connect with stakeholders. Failure to do so may result in reduced funding or more serious personal consequences for leadership. Hosting a live town hall meeting may satisfy this requirement, but stakeholders are typically cynical about this type of effort and what it can really accomplish.

**Hard costs:** When engagement fails on some topics (e.g. school closures), chances are high that the conversation is not yet over. This means you will be back 'at the table' in the future, either dealing with the issue again or addressing the fallout from an unpopular decision. Costs may vary, but they add up quickly when you factor in your own time and that of any other administrator involved.

If you agree that stakeholder engagement is a vital part of your role as an education leader, then your challenge now shifts from whether or not to engage to how best to engage.

**FFACT: 5 Criteria for a Successful Stakeholder Engagement System**
The following five criteria form the basis of a truly successful stakeholder engagement program. When evaluating options, you should aim for an approach that offers them all. If that's not an option, then you should strive for as many as possible.

1. Fast – deployment and response

2. Flexible – the ability to adapt to varying needs and scope

3. Accessible – to stakeholders and multiple users

4. Controlled – avoid the hazards of Facebook, Twitter and blogs

5. Transparent – allowing stakeholders to maintain visibility into the process from start to finish

Let's take a closer look at each of these criteria. You may choose to assign different weights to them based on your unique needs.

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**Fast**

While some issues can be predicted well in advance – closing a school, adopting a new calendar, selling off district real estate, etc. – long consultation lead times are not always a luxury you will have. When a burning issue comes up, the quicker you can get in front of stakeholders to gather input, the better. The system you use needs to be easy and fast to deploy. It should also be easy and fast for your audience to participate. As we'll explore under 'Accessible', this often means being able to participate when and where it suits your stakeholders, not you.

**Flexible**

When you make an investment in any asset – be it a building, a computer, a table or a stakeholder engagement system – the more flexibility you have in using it, the more you will use it. The more you use it, the greater its value. Flexibility applies as much to your stakeholders as it does to you. Your engagement system's flexibility is measured in a number of ways: its ability to cover a wide range of topics, accommodation for a range of response types (i.e. list, multiple choice and open-ended) and a cost structure that allows for repeat usage. You will get a lot more mileage out of a system that comes with fewer constraints regarding its use.

Another important determination of Flexibility is a system's ability to help choose priorities among all the feedback. For example, while fifty people might raise a given issue, it doesn't necessarily mean that it should be your top priority. Better to gauge its significance by letting stakeholders rank it relative to other issues. To accomplish this you have to be able to share feedback among participants so that all ideas and thoughts are tabled for everyone's consideration. Often the idea of a single person may trump all others once everyone else becomes aware of it. It is this flexibility that enables you to move from a simple sounding board or survey to a more meaningful platform for genuine insight, issue discovery and prioritization.

**Accessible**

Accessibility should be judged from the perspective of both the user (e.g. the district superintendent) and the participant. Ideally, your engagement system will be available to as many people as possible on both sides of the exchange. On the user side, you will reap greater benefit if your system can be used at various levels, for example the district as a whole and each school within. As we've explored in another paper, each level will have its own motivation for engagement and should be empowered to do so. On the

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stakeholder side, the more stakeholders you can reach, the stronger the engagement and the more dependable its output. This is where parent council or town hall meetings fall painfully short, and where online or email based systems offer the greatest opportunity.

**Controlled**

Assuming your system delivers in terms of being Fast, Flexible and Accessible, for it to really contribute effectively it has to allow you to manage the process, keep discussions on topic and comply with your communications policies. While it might sound appealing to open a Facebook page and let your audience share, like and comment away, this environment is not designed – and hence not suitable – for operational decision making support. For starters, you cannot easily control who joins your page, makes comments or starts conversations. The same goes for Twitter, which also lacks the 'memory' capabilities to provide you with meaningful, validated input; once someone mentions your school in a post, it flashes across the Twittersphere and then disappears almost as quickly as it appeared. None of these platforms – blogs included – offer the structure and process to conduct meaningful, organized and focused engagement.

**Transparent**

Despite the best of intentions, school boards and parent councils are already prone to accusations of operating in isolation of and with little feedback to stakeholders. No amount of Public Relations efforts can easily reverse this perception. The only thing that can is a sustained effort to share and publish thoughts and actions with stakeholders via meaningful communication channels. Unfortunately, websites, blogs and newsletters don't quite cut it due to their low subscription rates. Town hall meetings are promising but they don't reach enough people. Email? Good reach, but it's hard to know who's actually reading them.

An effective engagement system must make the ongoing discussion visible to all participants, not just at the beginning or end, but throughout the entire process. The benefits of maintaining this transparency include:

- Mitigation of accusations of closed-door policy discussions

- The ability for people to see the input of others and potentially change their own ideas

- Discoverable support for decisions made

- Ongoing inclusion of participants, which fosters stronger buy-in

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> *Technology-based solutions hold the key to more successful stakeholder engagement initiatives.*

Achieving more effective, more efficient stakeholder engagement is more accessible than ever, thanks to a wealth of new technologies available to education leaders. It has never been easier or faster to gather input for identifying issues and shaping decisions in a healthy, collaborative and cost-effective manner. This does not mean that traditional stakeholder channels such as parent council and town hall meetings should be abandoned; on the contrary, these channels can become more efficient and effective themselves when guided by a larger audience.

Let's now turn to an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of established options for stakeholder engagement, evaluating them based on the FFACT set of criteria. While your own experience may differ in some nuances, chances are strong it will align overall with this analysis.

**Table 1** makes it obvious that traditional engagement methods do not deliver reliable results. It also reveals that more modern, technology-based solutions hold the key to more successful initiatives, based on their stronger adherence to the FFACT criteria.

Broadening the reach of stakeholder engagement beyond the traditional channels may seem challenging to some education leaders. But when you consider their limitations and what can occur as a result, it becomes easier to open up to new options. As demonstrated above, some of the disadvantages of these traditional channels should be enough to get you thinking about alternatives. Investing in an effective stakeholder engagement system will greatly strengthen the perspectives, actions and perceptions of education leaders at every level. Not only will you be more in tune with the wishes and expectations of parents and other stakeholders, but you will also enjoy broader support and buy-in which will make your job easier, more productive and more satisfying in the short and long run.

### Conclusion

Most school districts across North America deeply understand the value and power of stakeholder engagement. Not only can it yield better ideas and decisions, it can also bring about better buy-in and stronger trust between leaders and stakeholders. The end result is a ore efficient, effective and harmonious process for identifying and addressing major issues. Armed with a clear sense of what a successful engagement system looks like, many school districts will see opportunities for immediate improvement in their engagement efforts. Fortunately, advances in

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**Table 1** – Evaluation of Dominant Engagement Options

| Options | Avdantage | Disadvantage | Fast | Flexible | Accessible | Controlled | Transparent |
|---------|-----------|--------------|------|----------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Parent council. Meeting Town Hall. | Personal. Live. Social. | Time-consuming. Poor representation of stakeholder group. Subject to misappropriation by 'strong' voice. | N | Y | N | N | N |
| After-school survey / poll. | Focused. Issue-driven. Personal. Live. Social. | Resource-intensive. Intrusive. Potentially non-representative participation. | Y | Y | N | Y | N |
| Online survey. | Inexpensive. Wide reach. Reporting friendly. | Prone to research bias. No shared learning. No buy-in. Survey fatigue. | Y | Y* | Y | Y | N |
| Independent Consultant | Can adapt to your unique needs. Draws on extensive experience. Can also help with decision making and implementation. | May not be available in your area. Expensive. What methods are being used to gather data? | N | Y | N | N | N |

*\* Surveys are flexible in terms of their ability to cover a range of topics and offer different response types, but they do not allow you to easily rank responses collectively to set priorities. See P6 for the complete definition of Flexibility.*

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technology and online access have yielded new, more effective and more efficient ways of connecting with stakeholders – systems that maximize the benefits of engagement for everyone on both sides of the equation.

As you explore ways to improve stakeholder engagement in your district or school, keep in mind the criteria for success put forth in this paper, and be mindful of the obstacles that can get in the way. Determine what's most important for you and your stakeholders then evaluate the many options at your disposal. The opportunity for upping your game has never been as accessible as it is today.

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1. School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action (2nd edition), Joyce L. Epstein, M.G. Sanders, B.S. Simon, K.C. Salinas, N.R. Jansorn, and F.L. Voorhis, Corwin, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002
2. a) Lakewood (NJ) School Board reverses decision to close middle school after parent outcry; b) Madison School Board Reverses Consolidation Decision after parent reaction; c) After protests, city reverses decision to close Brooklyn school; d) District 203 hearing outcry over when to start school year.

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