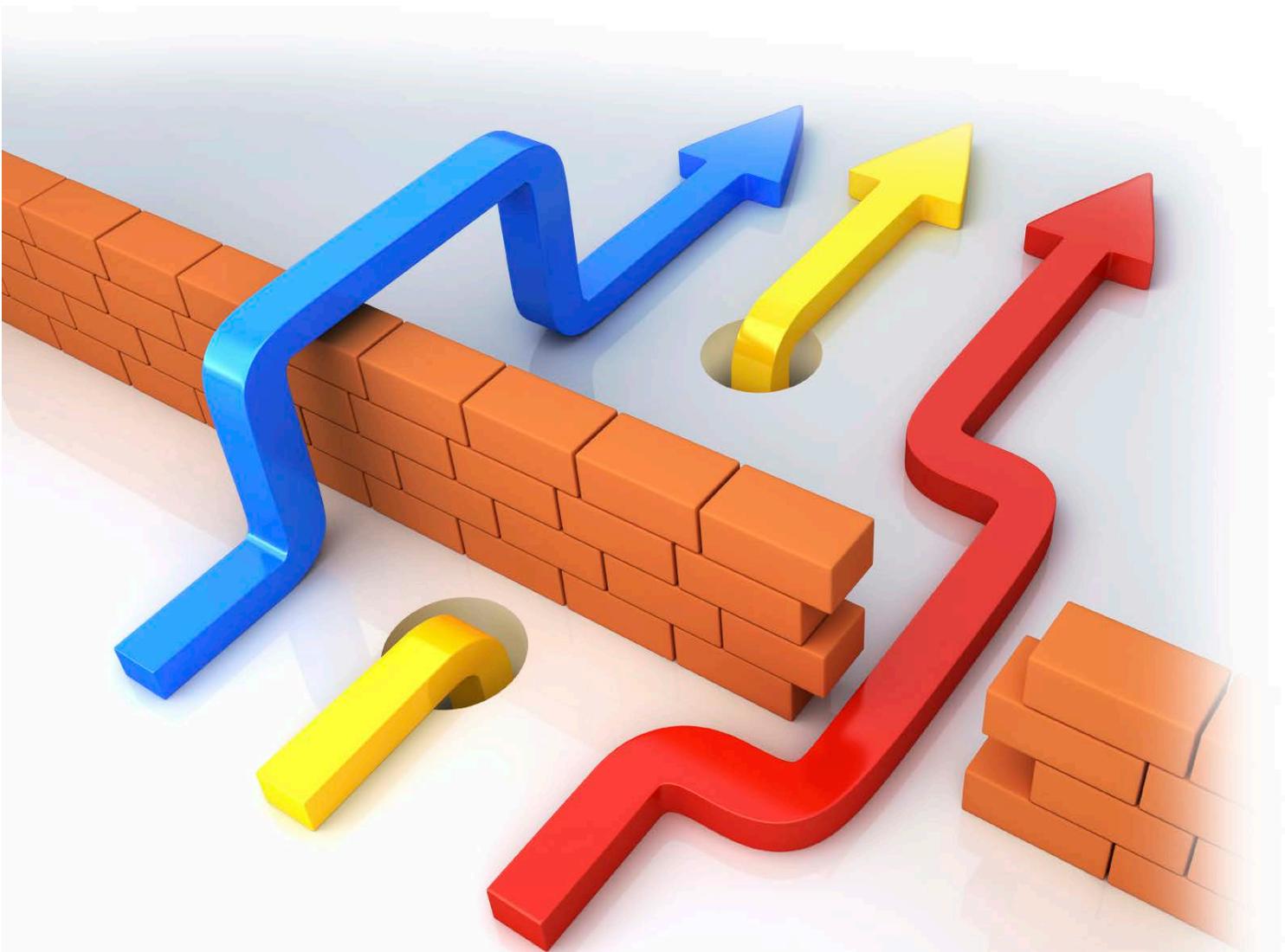


Parent Participation Roadblocks

Where Popular Processes Fall Short and How to Engage More Effectively

This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of the most common means of parent engagement and offers a model for more meaningful and effective parent - educator collaboration that meets the needs and expectations of both groups.



Introduction

In North American education circles, parent engagement is a topic as uncomfortable as it is popular. If you're an educator, you already know that primary and secondary schools wrestle constantly with the roles of parents and families in the education system, and are in constant pursuit of ways in which to engage them more meaningfully and effectively. The struggle for engagement comes from within – educators trying to figure out how to involve parents cooperatively and practically – and from without – parents and families who can and want to play an active role in their children's education.

This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of the most common means of parent engagement and offers a model for more meaningful and effective parent-educator collaboration that fully meets the needs and expectations of both groups.

It isn't getting any easier to work in public education. Leaders face a complex and ever-changing set of challenges: budgets are under pressure, labor relations require constant care and attention, and keeping the curriculum in sync with the evolving needs of society can frustrate even the most seasoned visionary. Throw in technology and its exciting yet potentially disruptive capabilities and one can quickly appreciate just how hard a job this is.

Another perpetual challenge facing education leaders is the increasing pressure to be more responsive and accountable to a wide range of stakeholders:

For principals, pressure is applied by district leadership to be 'more in touch' with parent advisory councils and the parent population at large, along with maintaining productive working relationships with faculty and staff

Principals also feel direct pressure from parents, faculty and staff to be more accessible and responsive

At the school district level, pressure is exerted by parents, trustees and the government to maintain a functional and practical curriculum, to stay at or under budget and to pay heed to the voice of the community at large.

How are these challenges addressed and the pressure relieved? How well do the chosen approaches help attain increased responsiveness and accountability?

This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of the more common tools of engagement used by today's education leaders. It follows up with a suggested model for successful engagement against which any solution should be judged. While the notion of engagement can be applied to any stakeholder group with an interest in education, the discussion herein focuses exclusively on parents and family.

Defining Engagement

Let's start by defining 'engagement'. Many thinkers and doers in the education field use the terms 'participation', 'involvement' and 'engagement' interchangeably, but the latter connotes the biggest and most sincere investment. When a parent volunteers as a classroom reader, she is participating; when she sits on a committee or helps run a school event, she is involved. All of these contributions are highly valued and needed. But when a parent is engaged, she takes on a more functional role, meshing with school leadership and serving as a true partner in the education process. The difference is subtle but the impact is significant. Participating and getting involved are more easily achieved; being engaged is a deeper and more profound connection. To quote a leading authority on the subject, "...engagement implies enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning, with teachers' knowledge. There is a sense of reciprocity in their mutual engagement, a sense of benefit for families and the school."ⁱ

Why is Engagement Needed?

Parents today are more demanding than ever, regardless of their degree of involvement. By grace of modern technology, it has never been easier to access education leaders at all levels, whether directly or via web sites, email or community forums. In parallel, schools and school districts are openly exposed to scrutiny and public commentary, often through channels like Facebook and Twitter over which they have no control. Gone are the days when the public education went about its business in relative privacy.

This increased exposure to stakeholder and public scrutiny is ironically matched by declining participation in the more common methods of gathering input and feedback. These methods – council meetings, surveys and online or phone meetings – suffer from declining support for a range of reasons including timing, geography, and in the case of surveys, fatigue.

“ *Parent engagement is very important to us, but in today's ever busier world it is becoming more and more difficult to hear from everyone. Attendance at Parent Advisory Council meetings is always a challenge, as it is difficult for school administration to speak with all stakeholders as often as we would like to. Over the years, we have tried surveys but they are not mutually beneficial or informative to the parents and it is difficult to really know what to do with the data.* ”

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There is also the potential reluctance by leaders to open up the ‘Pandora’s Box’ of public consultation; what will they hear when they pose the question, how representative will the feedback be and how should they respond?

If you’re an education leader, it’s tempting to think that the channels are in place for parent input and it’s up to them to take part. However the reality is that you’ll be criticized even by those who don’t attend your meetings or complete your surveys, and you’ll be accused of not listening or not making yourself accessible. The customer’s always right, right?

There is ample evidence of the positive correlation between strong parent engagement and student performanceⁱⁱ, but how do we reconcile this with what appears to be declining participation in engagement processes?

Strengths and Weaknesses of Current Engagement Processes

To demonstrate the need for better engagement, let’s take a look at some of the more common methods currently in use by education leaders across North America.

1. Council Meetings

Face-to-face meetings offer unrivaled, authentic opportunities to really get in touch with your stakeholders. It is basic human nature to feel closer to someone that we’ve met, and that goes a long way toward strengthening relationships. Council meetings are far from perfect though. Here is just a sample of some of the shortcomings of this process.

- a. How easy is it for parents to attend when they have to feed and bathe their children, or they’re busy shuttling them from school to soccer to piano to tutoring? While there are no statistics on participation, it’s common knowledge that the numbers are low.
- b. Say you have gotten people to show up. Is the turnout representative of your student body?
- c. You have an agenda full of important items you wish to cover, but are they mutually significant? Are you addressing those issues that the parents deem important? Can you successfully get through your agenda, let alone any other business that may arise?
- d. How well do you deal with ‘council bullies’ – those parents who by personality come to dominate the room and overly influence discussions? Groupthink is a widely documented challenge for live

meetings, known to discourage independent thoughts and reduce openness and honesty.

- e. You've managed to have some good discussions and your secretary has taken reliable minutes. Can you get confirmation from parents – particularly those who didn't attend – that you're on the right track? Is the feedback loop now closed?

2. Online Surveys

Online surveys hold several advantages over live council meetings. Delivered via email and accessible wherever and whenever the recipient wants, online surveys will reach more people and will most likely yield higher participation rates than council meetings. Like their live counterparts, however, online surveys come with disadvantages.

- a. Do you have all or most of your parents' email addresses? Do you have enough for a representative sample?
- b. We all get exposed to a myriad of surveys throughout our waking hours, through our inbox, by phone and in person. Are you confident yours will even be seen, let alone taken? Will it end up in the Junk folder?
- c. Are you skilled in writing effective surveys? Are they the right length? Do you pose questions clearly and without bias?
- d. If you've asked open ended questions that allow participants to say whatever they want, how are you meaningfully collating their responses and how are you determining what you should pay attention to? Some comments are more easily dismissed than others, but for all those that sound good, what do you do with them?
- e. Once you've collected all your 'data', what next? How do you share what you've learned with your team? With the parents? Is the feedback loop now closed?

3. Web meetings and conference calls

Online meetings and conference calls allow people to join your meeting from the comfort of their homes, potentially resulting in higher participation than in-person meetings. The technology is inexpensive or even free, with minimal barriers to adoption. Despite their attractiveness, they are not without fault.

“ *Bottom line: In order to be responsive and accountable, public education leaders need a better way to engage effectively and efficiently with parents.* ”

- a. As with in-person meetings, not everyone will be able to attend due to scheduling conflicts.
 - b. There is no guarantee that you’ll get a representative sample of parents to participate.
 - c. Those who do attend could be easily distracted by the goings-on in the home and not give their full attention to the discussion.
 - d. These processes are still susceptible to groupthink and influence from more outspoken or domineering participants.
 - e. It remains unclear if the best of the group came forward.
4. Online collaboration platforms
- There are many tools available to facilitate online collaboration. Online communities are well used by consumer product companies to stay in touch with their customers, and have made inroads into the not-for-profit sector as prices have fallen. These platforms are highly interactive and offer tremendous potential for creative engagement. Like the other processes listed above, they are not perfect.
- a. These platforms are harder to setup and manage than most other processes.
 - b. They typically come in at a higher price, although there are some free platforms with more limited capabilities.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - c. From the general public’s perspective, these tools are not yet widely adopted. They can be complicated to learn and use, and as such they are liked by some, not by others. This can negatively impact participation rates and skew participation toward parents with higher computer literacy.

Fundamentals of Successful Engagement

When considering the strengths and weaknesses of the engagement processes outlined above, at least three contributing factors to success become clear:

Accessibility: how easy it is to both solicit and contribute feedback?

Interactivity: is there an opportunity to consider and review contributions through more than one cycle of question-and-response?

Simplicity: How easy is it for everyone to take part in the process? Without strong scores in each of these areas, an engagement process will likely fail

to deliver the desired results.

When we evaluate the common practices listed above according to how they achieve the goal of engagement, judging them by these three contributing factors, we quickly see how they fall short of the objective.

At quick glance, there is an apparent trade-off between Accessibility and Engagement: the more accessible a process, the less engaging it is. Conversely, the better a process does at Engagement, the worse it seems to do in terms of Accessibility. Not surprisingly, the simpler the process, the less likely it is to be Interactive or Engaging. It would appear that we have to

Table 1 – Evaluation of Common Engagement Processes

	Accessibility	interactivity	simplicity	Engagement
Online surveys	High	Low	High	Low
Webmeetings and conference calls	Medium	Low	High	Low to medium
Council meetings	Low	Medium	Medium to high	Medium
Online collaboration platforms	Low to medium	High	Low to medium	Medium to high

sacrifice at least some Simplicity in order to start generating real Engagement. As should be expected, Interactivity is a heavily weighted factor in successful engagement; the ability to participate in an on-going, iterative basis increases the parents' sense of truly being a part of the process.

A Model for Successful Engagement

So what does a truly successful engagement process require? Taking into consideration the definition of and criteria for engagement presented above, it should accomplish the following:

Accessibility

The goal of any process of engagement should be to enable better and more representative contributions from parents while ensuring leaders retain

a sense of control. To accomplish this, the process needs to be accessible by as many parents as possible, on terms and conditions that meet their needs. The chosen process must encourage broad participation by parents, both in terms of how and when they participate. The more a process is unshackled from a fixed schedule and location, the more accessible it becomes and the more likely parents will be to participate.

Accessibility should not come at the sacrifice of any other criteria, since obtaining as wide a range of input as possible is a fundamental requirement of any engagement process. Similarly, if a process is highly accessible but fails when measured by other factors, it cannot be labeled as engaging.

Interactivity

A single question-answer-decision cycle might work well for simple issues (what color should the new playground equipment be?), but it is insufficient for the more complex issues that keep education leaders awake at night. This cycle doesn't generate enough confidence that the feedback is sufficient or complete so as to render the decision obvious. Furthermore, parents are prematurely detached from the decision-making process, and are denied the opportunity to provide further guidance in consideration of all the answers that were offered.

Proper engagement requires a longer, iterative cycle of question-answer-refinement before a decision is made. More iteration and interaction will build up confidence in the results for both sides. For example, you ask an open ended question about after-school programming ideas and you get 15 ideas. Now what? If you make the call on your own you risk being perceived as inattentive, or worse, authoritarian. What if you could go back to your audience with these ideas and have them rank or prioritize them into a Top 5 list? Each participant will discover ideas not their own and will have the chance to change their minds based on the newly discovered information. They will also be asked to help out with choosing, not just suggesting ideas. The extended depth of interaction provided by this iteration yields deeper engagement and a stronger sense of contribution and buy-in from stakeholders.

A process high on accessibility but low on interaction is therefore insufficient in meeting the demands of education leaders. Interaction on its own is also insufficient, as witnessed by the challenges associated with highly interactive processes like council meetings and online collaboration.

Iterative cycles must be easy to manage, both in terms of collating

responses, pushing them back out to respondents, and enabling further contributions. While there needs to be a limit on the number of cycles, 'more than one' is a vast improvement over the current state of affairs.

Simplicity

In the discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of traditional feedback methods above, simplicity figures prominently. Council meetings are neither simple to carry out or participate in; surveys appear simple enough for both but any researcher will be quick to point out that they are far from simple when it comes to scripting and iteration.

The ideal process cannot present a steep learning curve or other barrier to adoption to either education leaders or parents. It cannot require parents to adopt a method of participating that is radically different from anything they are already used to, otherwise participation numbers will suffer. Only when the barriers to adoption are lowered for both education leaders and parents can a process become truly engaging.

Processes that satisfy as many of these criteria as possible will ensure that parents feel more engaged while giving leaders confidence that they have parents' support and buy-in. While this might not provide direct relief from challenges stemming from budgets and public policy, it will help education leaders answer the call to be more responsive and accountable.

Not to be overlooked is the need for such a system to provide sufficient transparency into how it works, as well as the ability to provide evidence and support for decisions taken. When asked by the district superintendent why a given decision was made, the school principal should be able to offer ample evidence of parent input, either through easily generated reports or some other means of presentation.

Conclusion

When it comes to hearing the true voice of the parent & family community, old habits may be hard to break. There simply aren't that many effective tools of engagement available. If you rely on the typical methods – meetings and surveys – chances are you're fueling the flames of discontent even while you attempt to douse them. If you've tried some of the newer techniques, you're likely not getting the participation or representation that you need, and so again, you're not appearing to be as accessible and accountable as your audience expects.

Intentions are beyond question; what you need are better results. As you

explore new opportunities for engaging effectively with parents, family or any other stakeholder group, there are three factors to consider: Accessibility, Interactivity and Simplicity. In these cases, more is more, so be sure to evaluate your options critically and strive for the highest score in each factor.

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i Pushor, Debbie, PhD. Parent Engagement: Creating a Shared World, presented at the Ontario Education. Research Symposium, Jan. 18-20, 2007.

ii Spotlight on Parent Engagement, Sept. 2011, Government of Alberta report taken from http://education.alberta.ca/media/6591254/spotlight_on_parent_engagement_sept_2011.pdf. See also <http://www.education.com/reference/article/parental-involvement-schooling/>

iii http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/200835/15_free_online_collaboration_tools_for_business.html. See also www.scribblar.com

