

Exploring Community Engagement

Listening to community members and driving positive change in your district

About this time last school year, Superintendent Dan Olson and the board of the Campbellsport School District were facing a crossroads.

They had a decision to make that affected all elementary students. In an effort to remedy imbalanced class sizes at the schools - a small school on one end of the district and a much larger school on the other - the board considered six options for grade reconfiguration. One option got legs: transferring all sixth graders from one school to the other.

Before jumping to this conclusion, the board decided it needed to hear from the public, and hear it did. In a matter of a few weeks, the board held two parent listening sessions that led to public discussion. Community members and parents, who felt they hadn't been asked for input before a decision was reached, primarily spoke out against the plan.

It was at this point that the board decided to maintain the status quo for the current school year, and to seek more community involvement in making recommendations on the issue to move forward, thus allowing cool heads to prevail and the community to be heard.

Speaking at the Wisconsin Association of School Public Relation Association (WSPRA) Spring Workshop, Olson said he helped the board create a committee of board members, administrators, staff, and community members. The committee benefited from the help of a facilitator from CESA 6. They had approximately

seven months to recommend a long-term plan for the grade reconfiguration between the two grade schools and the junior/senior high school.

The committee took the lessons learned from their first attempt at change and implemented a thorough, strategic process of engagement, including inviting people to tour the buildings, consideration of busing options, analysis of enrollment projections, cost analysis, and educational impact.

Community Engagement: A Definition

It is relationship-building for the sake of community, not for the sole purpose of money-making or marketing a product. Below is an 8-step guideline developed by Hildy Gottlieb of Creating the Future. The steps are:

- **Determine** the goals of the plan.
- **Plan** who to engage.
- **Develop** engagement strategies for those individuals you already know.
- **Develop** engagement strategies of those individuals you do not already know.
- **Prioritize** those activities.
- **Create** an implementation plan.
- **Monitor** your progress.
- **Maintain** those relationships.

The district also conducted a community-wide survey. Based on the public input from the survey, the committee was able to come to consensus and proceeded with a recommendation.

The recommendation was communicated publicly first by posting it to the school website, then by holding an open listening session, and finally by inviting public comments to be submitted on the school website.

The second time around, the tone of the parent meetings were completely different, and parents gave positive feedback. The committee kept the information campaign going to give everyone adequate time for input, and eventually came to a satisfactory conclusion for grade reconfiguration.

By retracing their steps and taking the time to listen to the voice of the community, Campbellsport was able to come to consensus on a difficult decision in their district.

■ Spectrum of Public Participation

The steps that Olson and his school board took can be traced through the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) "Spectrum of Public Participation." IAP2 is an international organization dedicated to setting the standard for all organizations that want to implement effective public involvement programs. The Public Participation Spectrum (see "IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation" graphic), identifies the increasing levels of public

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ABOUT WSPRA

The Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA)

is a professional association representing schools, school districts, educational associations, consulting agencies and organizations. WSPRA is a state affiliate of the National School Public Relations Association.

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IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL

INFORM

To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

CONSULT

To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

INVOLVE

To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

COLLABORATE

To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

EMPOWER

To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

impact as the process of community engagement progresses.

Mary Hamel, trainer for IAP2 and a specialist in community engagement, also spoke at WSPRA's Spring Workshop, which focused on community engagement. Hamel said many districts start out at Inform — by creating fact sheets, web pages, or holding open houses about an issue or concern.

As more stakeholders become aware of an issue, engagement moves through the stages of Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and ultimately, Empower, as final decision-making is placed in the hands of the public. Empower is the end outcome of a referendum campaign that ends in a ballot decision, for example.

Why is Community Engagement Important?

Some in school leadership may ask, 'Why should we open up decision-making to stakeholders who may not have knowledge about complex issues?' Hamel shared these compelling reasons to utilize community engagement, including:

- **To get better** information — people often know more than we think;
- **To avoid surprises** — as an early warning about potential hot topics;
- **To encourage** ownership, support, and partnership;

- **To clear up** misunderstandings and keep the citizenry informed;
- **To create** long-term relationships with the community; and
- **To make** better decisions tailored to the local situation.

Hamel emphasized the key to successful community engagement is to learn how to listen to stakeholders better in order to better gauge our school community's values. What we may assume to be important to our parents, for

example, may turn out to be false, after taking the time to gain input on an issue. Through better listening and analysis, we can increase the buy-in decision-making, and create a two-way dialogue.

Through two-way dialogue and a focus on listening to community members, school leadership teams can move their districts forward, with their community's interests in mind, and a focus on students. ■

Winckler, APR, is a WSPRA board member.



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