



- 3 Evaluate public engagement
- 4 Where are you coming from?
- 5 Building a message box
- 6 Taking stock of standards
- 7 Resources
- 8 Ask Dr. Developer

## Engaging the public builds support for schools

By Joan Richardson

The scenario has been played out again and again in schools. Usually, it goes something like this: A parent learns about a change in curriculum from her child's classroom teacher. The teacher is not altogether happy about this change; she may even be confused about why the change was made and she communicates that to the parent. The parent shares that concern with other parents. Soon, a group of parents is worried about this change in curriculum and, perhaps, angry because they weren't aware of or involved in making the decision.

Many schools and districts fail to recognize the important role that teachers — and other school employees — play in shaping public support for education. "Alienated employees do damage inside and outside schools. They are probably responsible for more defeated bond and levy voters than the most active antitax community groups," write Adam Kernan-Schloss and Andy Plattner in a recent article in *Educational Leadership*. Kernan-Schloss and Plattner are the principals in A+ Com-

munications, one of the leading consultants on public engagement.

Polls indicate that 88 percent of American parents consider their child's teacher their most credible source of information about education issues. Second in line are children, followed by other parents. School officials rank fourth and the media even farther behind.

In a recent national poll, teachers were rated as the most trusted profession, coming even ahead of members of the clergy and substantially ahead of the media.

While school districts spend considerable sums trying to reach the public through the media, experts like Kernan-Schloss and Plattner are increasingly suggesting that teachers

are overlooked actors in the important work of "public engagement."

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform, one of several groups actively working in this area, defines public engagement as "a purposeful effort, starting in either the school system or the community, to build a collaborative constituency for change and improvement in schools."

*Continued on Page 2*

**TEACHERS ARE A VITAL  
LINK IN SHAPING PUBLIC  
SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION**

*Public Engagement*

# Engaging the public builds support for schools

*Continued from Page One*

Teachers play a crucial role in public engagement because of the respected position they hold. “When we ask parents how they want to get information about schools or about education, they say they want to hear it from their child’s teacher,” said Sylvia Soholt, a leading consultant in this area.

Since teachers are this important link between schools and the community, what can schools do to transform teachers into better communicators?

## **1) Ensure that teachers understand their valuable role as communicators.**

Begin by sharing with teachers information from surveys that indicate how valuable they are as communicators with parents. If possible, consider developing a local survey to buttress this point.

## **2) Ensure that all teachers have opportunities to participate in decision-making and to learn about reforms in which they have no decision-making role.**

Teachers who participate in decision-making regarding curriculum changes are likely to become better spokespersons for such issues than teachers who are distant from the process. Likewise, teachers who are involved in curriculum writing, lesson planning, and developing their own assessments are more likely to develop the kind of understanding needed for improved communications with parents. Weekly study groups and staff meetings could serve much the same function.

## **3) Examine current internal information-sharing approaches.**

To examine the existing practices in your school or district, consider these questions: Does each school and the district have a plan for sharing routine information with the staff? Are these strategies designed to reach all teachers? All employees? Does the staff know where to get needed information? Does the district rely on local newspapers to inform the staff about actions of the central office and the school board?

“We have consistently found that the primary communication problem is with internal audiences; the people who work for school districts are not adequately informed to do their jobs or to be good communicators themselves. In focus groups and in conversations, teachers have told us — with considerable levels of frustration — that they get their information about their own district from the local newspaper or the rumor mill and rarely from the district itself,” write Kernan-Schloss and Plattner.

The Cincinnati Public Schools recognized this problem when it began to move into more standards-based reforms. The district believed teachers would be more supportive of the reforms if they had a deeper understanding of the reforms and the reasons for them.

So Cincinnati created a variety of publications to reach teachers several times a week with new information about this quickly changing area. E-mail messages are sent regularly to teachers. The central office communications staff produces *UpToDate*, a weekly newsletter that focuses on board of education activity, decisions from administrators, honors received by employees, any court decisions affecting the schools, and personnel news. Once a month, *UpToDate* appears in expanded form and focuses on one aspect of reform, such as team-based schools or selecting a school focus.

## **4) Examine how individual teachers, the school, and the district already communicate with the community.**

Soholt encourages schools to list everything they currently do to reach out to the community. (See the tool on Page 3.) This list should include everything from teachers’ newsletters home to back-to-school nights, regular telephone calls to students’ homes to curriculum nights.

Then, organize all of those activities into chronological units. Often, Soholt said, a school will see a clog of activity in certain months and very little at other

times of the year.

Another way to analyze the activities is by sorting them into categories. For example, a school might be very active socially but offer few informational events for parents.

Once that list is prepared, a staff can discuss the patterns that emerge. A staff also can see existing activities that could be adapted for more communication about district programs.

For example, Soholt worked with one district that was frustrated at how little parents understood about the district’s science instruction. The district put a lot of energy into Odyssey of the Mind and its science fairs but it had never used those popular events to talk to parents about standards for science education. By tweaking those existing events, they were able to build on the existing good feeling about the extracurricular projects and also talk about classroom instruction.

Soholt said school staffs need to understand that they already have numerous opportunities for contact with the community. “You don’t always have to create one more thing to do. You can build on what’s already in place,” she said.

## **5) Provide staff development to help teachers learn how to have conversations about educational issues.**

Although teachers are comfortable talking in front of large groups of children, they often have difficulty talking to even small groups of adults.

Using the tool on Page 5, teachers can work with each other to identify the key points they want to make about issues of concern to them. By developing the key points together, they can refine the message they share with parents and other residents.

Then, allow teachers time to practice delivering their message by role-playing various situations where they might have opportunities to talk about their work. Staff meetings represent another time when teachers could practice sharing these messages with other adults.

# Evaluate public engagement

**COMMENTS TO FACILITATOR:** This activity can be used with a large staff meeting or with a school improvement team. Use it to help the group identify which outreach efforts already are under way at the school and list activities that it could begin.

**SUPPLIES:** Make enough copies of this list for all participants. Prepare an overhead before the meeting. Provide extra writing paper or sticky notes to help participants add items to list.

## Directions

1. Place prepared list on overhead. Distribute copies of the same sheet to all participants.
2. If the group is large, break down into smaller groups. Ask each group to add two kinds of activities to the list:
  - 1) Any additional current outreach activities in your school, and
  - 2) Any outreach activities that might be added.
3. Have each small group compile a complete list of all current and proposed activities suggested by the group.
4. Re-assemble the large group and compile all ideas into a complete list for the entire group.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

### SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

- Publish and distribute a school newsletter.
- Students take newsletter to their homes.
- Mail newsletter to every parent.
- Distribute school newsletter via e-mail to every parent.
- Post school newsletter on school web site.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### CLASSROOM NEWS

- Every classroom teacher regularly sends home newsletters to parents.
- Every "special" teacher regularly sends home newsletters to parents.
- Teachers post "news" on school web site.
- Teachers organize a telephone fan-out to ensure that every parent knows about key events in class.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### INCLUSION IN DECISION-MAKING

- Parents and community members are included in decision-making bodies in the school.
- In the district.
- The district relies on community newspaper to inform residents about key developments.
- The district distributes a newsletter to every home in the district to inform residents about key developments.
- The district maintains an active web site to keep residents up-to-date on key developments.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### ACCESS TO TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS

- Principal has informal group meetings with parents, residents.
- Grade-level or subject area teachers have informal group meetings with parents, residents.
- Principal has regular, open office hours when any resident can drop in to discuss issues of concern.
- Every teacher has regular, open "office" hours when any parent can visit.
- Teachers and principal publicize their e-mail addresses.
- Teachers and principal publicize their phone numbers.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### SCHOOL-HOME OUTREACH

- Teachers visit each student's home at least once a year.
- Teachers telephone each student's home regularly.
- Teachers participate in parent-teacher conferences
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Once a year.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Twice a year.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Three times a year.
- School/district has informal get-ready-for-school events.
- School has back-to-school, get-acquainted nights.
- School has annual curriculum nights to explain how each subject is taught.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Tools For Schools

**Out with the old,  
in with the new**

As schools and communities move from communication to engagement:

**OLD:** Communicate to

**NEW:** Deliberate with

**OLD:** Public hearing

**NEW:** Community conversation

**OLD:** Talk to, tell

**NEW:** Talk with, share

**OLD:** Information out

**NEW:** Information around

**OLD:** Seeking to establish/protect turf

**NEW:** Seeking and finding common ground

**OLD:** Authority

**NEW:** Responsibility

**OLD:** Influencing the like-minded

**NEW:** Understanding those not like-minded

**OLD:** Top down

**NEW:** Bottom up

**OLD:** Establishing a hierarchy for decision-making

**NEW:** Building a network of stakeholders

**OLD:** Goals/strategic plans

**NEW:** Values/vision

**OLD:** Products

**NEW:** Process

**OLD:** Public relations

**NEW:** Public engagement

Source: **Reasons for hope, voices for change** by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

# Where are you coming from?

**COMMENTS TO FACILITATOR:** This activity should inform participants about the attitudes and philosophies of “the other side.”

**SUPPLIES:** Sticky notes or blank index cards, poster paper, masking tape.

## Directions

1. Give each participant two 3-by-5 inch sticky notes or blank index cards and tape.
2. Ask participants to reflect on their best and worst school experiences. Then, ask them to jot down one experience on each of the notepapers provided.  
Time: 5 minutes.
3. Ask participants to post their notes on the wall.
4. Ask participants to walk along the wall and read the comments. Time: 10 minutes.
5. Lead a discussion about the experiences participants have described.
  - What are the common themes that participants have raised?
  - What do these themes suggest about how individuals perceive school and how they perceive themselves as learners?
  - What do these themes suggest about how schools should be organized to improve learning for all students? For all adults?

# Building a message box

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** This framework can be used to assist teachers or administrators in identifying three or four important facts or statements they can use to describe a current issue to parents or other residents. The framework can be used with any topic of concern.

In a dozen words or less, what is the goal of \_\_\_\_\_?

---

---

---

How does your program/activity/position improve education in your school/district/state/province?

---

---

---

Synthesize and prioritize these statements into three or four key points.

1. 

---

---
2. 

---

---
3. 

---

---
4. 

---

---

What data supports these points?

---

---

---

---

---

*Schools cannot meet  
the challenges of  
reform without first  
doing a better job of  
connecting with  
parents and the  
public.*

— Ron Brandt,  
educational consultant

# Taking stock of standards

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** Use these questions to lead a discussion to help various groups quickly assess how successfully your school communicates standards-related issues to families and to staff.

**PREPARATION:** Create a copy of this matrix as an overhead and also reproduce on paper.

## Directions

1. Separate parents and educators into two groups. Then create smaller, working groups out of the two large groups. (Note: This activity could be used with parents or educators alone, but eventually, the whole group should come together for a discussion.)
2. Ask each person to respond individually to the questions. Time: 10 minutes.
3. Ask each small group to discuss the responses to the questions. Time: 30 minutes.
4. Assemble the larger group. Ask representatives of each small group to summarize the key points in each of the responses. The facilitator should note the key points on the overhead copy of the matrix.

	<b>Do families have the information necessary to answer the question?</b>	<b>Do teachers and school staff have the information necessary to answer the question?</b>	<b>What steps does this school need to take to ensure that families, teachers, and school staff can answer the question?</b>
<b>1. What skills and knowledge will students be expected to master this year?</b>			
<b>2. How will students be evaluated?</b>			
<b>3. What can families do to stay more involved in their children's academic progress?</b>			
<b>4. How are students prepared for further learning after high school?</b>			

# Learning about public engagement

■ *Coming to public judgment: Making democracy work in a complex world* by Daniel Yankelovich. A deeper look at the value of including the public in basic conversations about all democratic institutions, including schools. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991. ISBN 0-8156-0254-5/YACPP. Price: \$16.95. Check your local library or order through a local bookstore.

■ Education Commission of the States produces several publications regarding public engagement, including:

- *Building community support for schools*. A guide to help communities organize their communication efforts to build public support for schools. Stock #AN-97-3. Price: \$10.

- *Listen, discuss, and act: Parents and teachers views on education reform* (1996). Includes numerous tools for planning and holding a meeting, discussion activities, ideas for overheads, follow-up and take-home materials and lists of additional resources. Includes a sample text of a conversation about your local school improvement efforts. Stock #AN-96-2. Price: \$10.

To order ECS publications, call (303) 299-3692 or fax (303) 296-8332.

■ “Engaging the public to improve student learning,” by Joan Richardson. *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 1997. Overview of the value of public engagement. Examples of school districts that have embraced the concept. Available at [www.nsdsc.org/library/jsd/jsdsm97rich.html](http://www.nsdsc.org/library/jsd/jsdsm97rich.html).

■ *How smart schools get and keep community support* by Susan Rovezzi Carroll and David Carroll. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service, 1994. Offers a plan for building community support for a school or district. To order, call (800) 733-

6786 or fax (812) 336-7790. Price: \$19.95.

■ *Is there a public for public schools* by David Mathews. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 1996. Based on 10 years of research, Mathews reflects on the attitude of Americans toward their schools and suggests new direction for communities. To order, call (800) 600-4060 or fax (937) 435-7367. Price: \$9.50. No shipping or handling.

■ Public Agenda reports on public engagement:

- *First things first: What Americans expect from public schools* (1994). Offers a detailed view of the public’s expectations for schools.

- *Accomplishing reform with public engagement: A map of the process* (1995). Designed to assist citizens and community groups who want to undertake reform and believe the public needs to be a partner for real change to occur.

- *Assignment incomplete: The unfinished business of education reform* (1995). Comprehensive study of public opinion on school reforms.

To order any Public Agenda report, call (212) 686-6610 or fax (212) 889-3461. Prices vary but range from \$7.50 to \$10 each.

■ *Reasons for hope: Voices for change* by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Summarizes the work of hundreds of schools and communities “doing” public engagement and helps practitioners understand the impact of public engagement for the improving public education. Ordering and download information is available at AISR’s web site — [www.aisr.brown.edu/html/pubeng.html](http://www.aisr.brown.edu/html/pubeng.html). The web site also includes an extensive list of other resources.

## NSDC STAFF

### Executive director

Dennis Sparks  
1124 W. Liberty St.  
Ann Arbor, Mich. 48103  
(734) 998-0574 Fax: (734) 998-0628

### Associate executive director

Stephanie Hirsh  
16306 Sunset Valley  
Dallas, Texas 75248  
(972) 818-1450 Fax: (972) 818-1451

### Business manager

Shirley Havens  
P.O. Box 240  
Oxford, Ohio 45056  
(513) 523-6029 Fax: (513) 523-0638

### Director of publications

Joan Richardson  
1128 Nottingham Road  
Grosse Pointe Park, Mich. 48230  
(313) 824-5061 Fax: (313) 824-5062

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Kathryn Harwell-Kee, president (2000)

Grapevine-Colleyville (Texas) ISD

Kathryn F. Blumsack (1999)

Gaithersburg, Md.

Bobb Darnell (2001)

District 214

Arlington Heights, Ill.

Mike Ford (1999)

Wayne Central School District

Ontario Center, N.Y.

Kay Lovelace (1999)

Philadelphia (Pa.) Public Schools

Gayle Moller (2000)

Western Carolina University

Cullowhee, N.C.

Marti Richardson (2001)

Knox County (Tenn.) Schools

Carole Schmidt (2000)

Tucson (Ariz.) Unified School District

Rosie O’Brien Vojtek (2001)

Oregon City (Ore.) School District

## TOOLS FOR SCHOOLS STAFF

**Editor:** Joan Richardson

**Designer:** Susan M. Chevalier

For information about membership, the NSDC annual conference, or additional copies of *Tools for Schools*, contact the NSDC Member Services office at (513) 523-6029.

For complete contact information for all staff and board members, visit our web site at [www.nsdsc.org/about.us.html](http://www.nsdsc.org/about.us.html) or see any issue of the *Journal of Staff Development*.

# Ask Dr. Developer



**Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)**

## Public engagement is not public relations

**Q** *My district already spends plenty of money on public relations, and we have plenty of parents involved in our schools. Why should we worry about “public engagement”?*

**A** There’s a big difference between public relations and public engagement. There’s even a difference between parent involvement and public engagement.

Public relations is almost always one-way communication. It’s talking to people outside of schools and school districts in an effort to improve the image of the school or district. Public engagement is really about including everyone in a community in making decisions about the schools.

What passes for parent involvement is often little more than having parents serve as party organizers or field trip drivers. But schools and districts that embrace the ideas of public engagement would want all parents — not just an elite handful — to be deeply involved in ensuring that educators align their work with the community’s priorities.

Teachers like you are an invaluable part

of this work. School reform is a team effort, and everyone on the team needs to be pulling in the same direction. To get that focus, teachers need to be involved in decision-making in their districts. They need time to more deeply understand the work they’re doing, why they’re doing it, and how it fits into a larger picture of reform.

Encouraging teachers to talk with each other — through study groups, through team meetings, through staff meetings — is a crucial step in helping them improve their abilities to talk with community members about educational issues. The more comfortable they feel discussing their work with colleagues, the more comfortable they will feel having those conversations among other groups of adults.

When schools and districts focus on public engagement — rather than public relations and parent involvement — they set a new standard for the work they do. They’re saying the schools belong to everyone in a community.

Imagine the power of having all adults in a community agree on what’s best for all children. That’s the sort of consistent message every community needs so that all schools strive to provide high levels of learning for all children.

**Tools may be copied and used in workshops. Articles may be reprinted with appropriate credit.**

### NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Member Services  
PO Box 240  
Oxford, Ohio 45056  
Membership info: (800) 727-7288

NON-PROFIT  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Permit No. 79  
Wheelersburg, OH  
45694