

Community Engagement

What a citizen budget team can do for your board

Community engagement, citizen involvement, communication with stakeholders ... We all know these buzzwords. They are the “politically correct” jargon that describes school leaders’ efforts to direct operations with just the right amount of input from citizens, staff, parents, the business community and local area governments.

Because school districts in Wisconsin are locally governed by elected board members, engagement of our citizens and other local government officials is an important way democracy plays out in our communities. The not-so-obvious part is figuring out how to accomplish this in an age of information overload, personal time and competing priorities.

Greendale has a long-standing tradition of community engagement, always increasing the number of ways in which we reach out to our community. When some of our methods and media are no longer working, we seek new ways to gather information from our community on key district issues, such as developing the budget.

Clearly we need to operate in the best interest of students, but we also know that taxpayers have important concerns and priorities. Why not look to the community for help in developing a budget that can work for everyone? All districts must keep the interests of the students at the forefront, while allocating district resources in a way that is satisfactory to the community as a whole.

Special Task Forces

We have developed special task forces that include citizens who agree to assist the district in devel-

oping the budget. Our district looks to these teams to enhance communication and serve as a resource by providing input, seeking feedback from fellow citizens and assisting in two-way communication.

Many districts use citizens in special teams, committees and task forces, either on a standing basis or for one-time purposes. In Greendale, there has been a Citizen Budget Team in place for several years. The team composition has changed over the years, depending upon the individual team members’ availability, but the purpose and objective of the team remains the same. Interested citizens with expertise in finance or budgeting meet quarterly to advise the district on budget issues. Some team members are accountants, while others have experience in the health-insurance industry or as employees of the Milwaukee County budget office. They all bring valuable expertise to the team and provide a service to the district.

The budget team’s main purpose is to help develop the annual district budget. Its budget recommendations are then presented to the school board. The team also serves as a sounding board for the school board. The board poses questions to the budget team to gather citizen feedback on important issues it is considering. The team also weighs in on debt issues, reviews benchmarking of the district in relation to others and discusses issues such as post-employment benefits, employee benefit levels, negotiations topics, deficits and facilities needs.

Some of the tough topics tackled by the budget team have been:

- How will enrollment projections affect the budget?

- What course of action is recommended to review operational effectiveness and efficiency?
- What course of action is recommended to fund future retirement benefits?
- What direction should be taken in regard to employee benefits in bargaining?
- What course of action is recommended to modernize the high school?
- What is the recommendation of the team regarding a possible facilities performance contract?
- Should the district’s core budget principles be changed?
- What is the recommended fund balance?
- How can the board and district most effectively communicate with the public?

Another citizen group had a profound effect in Greendale following a failed referendum. A resident approached the school board after recognizing that the high school facility was in need of improvements. That resident facilitated and led a citizen group to examine the high school facility, resulting in the development of a report with recommendations for the school board. The school board agreed to the resident’s proposal to form the committee, and an open invitation to residents interested in joining the committee was published. The group was formed by citizens, with district staff serving in a non-voting capacity.

The group set ground rules at its very first meeting. Members agreed to reach decisions and develop recommendations through consensus; all members of the team had to able

to accept each item recommended by the committee. "It was the committee's firm belief that providing educational excellence in a suitable facility at a reasonable cost to the village was our functional goal," according to the *2006 Final Report of the Citizen Facilities Committee*.

The committee met countless times over a six-month period. During that time, members reviewed prior facility plans, toured other benchmark high schools in the area and researched the school facility. They then prepared and presented a report to the school board that included a final recommendation. The citizens' committee "owned" its report, stating "we endorse and recommend the renovation of the building as outlined in this report." Each individual member of the committee signed his or her name to the document.

Technology

Finding community members who can devote the time necessary to serve on various committees is one drawback of the use of these groups. The district is now using a variety of tools to enhance the efficiency of communication within these groups and to reach beyond the core groups to gather additional feedback from the community at large.

The Greendale School District and the budget committee were able to reduce the number of face-to-face meetings by using a Web-based communication and task management program.

We have also used technology to allow the community to weigh in via the Internet.

Town Hall Meetings

The relationships built with the public are the building blocks of any district's accomplishments. While getting people to come out to meet-

ings is more and more difficult, having an "event" can draw crowds and solidify relationships. The Greendale School District's Annual Meeting to approve the annual budget has become an annual "town hall" event, drawing bigger crowds in recent years—800 people in 2005 and almost 500 in 2006. We've used the opportunity to provide a presentation on the "State of the Schools" and communicate the financial stability of the district. We hit on key messages to an audience that we might not otherwise be able to reach.

In Greendale we also have a history of offering "listening sessions" to the community on various topics, ranging from long-term planning, referendum planning, administrative recruitment, and other areas. Generally we begin a listening session by providing a short presentation. We then divide the group of participants into smaller discussion groups to focus on a few key questions, such as:

- 1) What is your preferred vision of the future of the Greendale School District budget?
- 2) What is your reality-based vision for the future of the budget?
- 3) Are you comfortable with the value Greendale receives for the level of local property taxes paid by residents? If not, briefly state what your priorities would be for the district's educational and park and recreation program. Where would you make cuts?
- 4) Should the district develop plans to go to referendum to repair the high school? (If not, how should the district plan to pay for the needed repairs?)
- 5) Do you have any suggestions on how Greendale schools can improve educationally without raising costs?

Community Survey

Needless to say, not all of our citizens attend the town hall meetings or listening sessions.

In November 2006, we sent a letter to every household in the community inviting them to complete a survey containing specific questions concerning the operation of our school district. It was an online survey, but paper copies were provided at the request of residents who did not respond online. Responses were gathered from a statistically valid sample of 660 people. The information provided the community perspective on everything from budget to curriculum.

Benefits of Community Engagement

It is through the combination of these varied approaches that we reach out to our community. Community members provide feedback and support on various issues. The district is able to gauge community interest on certain topics by developing these relationships with community members.

District leaders know the importance of community engagement. In today's busy world, we need to increasingly seek new ways to gather input from citizens. By providing various avenues to reach out to the community and gather feedback, we are able to reach more citizens and hear what our community values. ■

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