

# Exploring Community Engagement at the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association Spring Conference

School district decisions affect many stakeholders – students and their parents, staff, tax-payers, and community members. School leaders and communications professionals seek to engage these diverse groups in decision-making processes, to hopefully arrive at constructive solutions with the greatest benefit for all involved. But as it often the case in our districts, the stakes are high, and debates can get intense.

Participants at this year's WSPRA Spring Workshop dove deeply into community engagement theories, best practices and case studies. The Spring Workshop was designed to explore community engagement through a variety of presenters, so school leaders and communicators could gain practical strategies for the benefits and possibilities of true community engagement.

## Foundations of Community Engagement

Community engagement is at the heart of the practice of school public relations. The classical definition of public relations is, “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” Likewise, practical community engagement is an active process of implementing change, by building relationships for the sake of the community, and leading stakeholders to a mutually beneficial outcome at the end of the process. Throughout the day, we experienced both theory and hands-on community engagement practices.

The day opened with a lively, interactive presentation from Mary Hamel, trainer for the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) and a specialist in community engagement.

The IAP2 is an international organization dedicated to setting the standard for all organizations that want to implement effective public involvement programs. At the core of its curriculum is the Public Participation Spectrum, which identifies the increasing levels of public impact as the process of community engagement progresses.

Mary described how 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 so important?

Some in school leadership who have had bad experiences with community engagement may ask, why should we open up decision-making to stakeholders who may not have knowledge about complex issues? Mary 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

- To make better decisions tailored to the local situation

Mary emphasized that the key to successful community engagement was to learn how to listen to our 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 dialog.

### **Listening Techniques for Better Community Engagement**

The techniques for uncovering stakeholders' positions, interests and values on a subject are many. Some techniques are better for certain situations than others. Mary emphasized that there are no magic techniques – for significant efforts, multiple engagement techniques are likely needed to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders, just as multiple communications tactics are needed to reach diverse audiences. Much depends on the social and cultural environment in a district.

The attendees explored a few techniques hands-on, including the Conversation Café or World Café model, one-on-one discussions, and a unique technique called the Samoan Circle (also known as Revolving Conversation).

The Samoan Circle is a tribal technique that is best used early in the process of community engagement with large groups. It is a "leaderless" technique where several people are seated at a table (the "inner circle") and the rest of the group stands around the perimeter (the "outer circle"). Discussion on pre-determined topics or questions begins at the inner circle. The inner circle represents all the different viewpoints present, and others remain silent until the discussion progresses to the point that someone from the outer circle takes the place of someone at the inner table. This was a fascinating process to watch, as the participants self-facilitated a passionate discussion about a thorny school communication issue.

### **Survey Says**

One tried and true way school districts can jump-start the engagement process with stakeholders is by conducting surveys. Dr. Deb Kerr of the Brown Deer School District, and Kate Winckler, APR of CESA 6 joined Bill on a panel discussion and shared their experiences with community engagement. Bill Foster (School Perceptions) led the panel, and shared his proven 5-step community engagement process:

1. Inclusive Community Engagement
2. Solicit Meaningful Input via Surveys
3. Use Data to Drive Decision-Making
4. Develop Clear, Concise Communications, and
5. Utilize Traditional and Social Media to get the word out

Gathering data is critical to arriving at successful decisions. Bill explained how conducting an inclusive, community-wide survey can help to identify needs and set priorities. He emphasized how important it is to pay close attention to the wording on surveys and ballot questions, particularly when it comes to facilities questions. Kate shared how a community survey helped one district shape a critical ballot question. A small vocal minority was pushing for a referendum question to finance the construction of a new auditorium. However, community survey results did not show that the majority of community members supported this expenditure. It was left off the ballot, and the other referendum questions

passed easily. Dr. Kerr described how using an inclusive World Café model during her district's Transformation process helped guide leadership to shape their future course, as they underwent both physical and instructional changes at all levels in her district.

Ultimately, the lesson learned was gathering inclusive data from surveys, either external or internal, is critical in establishing priorities and creating key messages that accurately reflect the needs of stakeholders.

### **Using Community Engagement to Solve Difficult Problems**

The last speaker of the day at the Spring Workshop was Dan Olson, Superintendent of the Campbellsport School District. He described how he used the process of community engagement to solve a contentious issue in his district.

Due to demographic shifts, the population of the two elementary schools in Campbellsport, Eden Elementary and Campbellsport Elementary, was imbalanced, and class sizes differed between the two schools. The board considered six short-term options for grade reconfiguration and facilities use. In a matter of a few weeks, the board chose an option, held one parent listening session and one public discussion. After intense parent backlash to the plan, the board decided to maintain the status quo until a better resolution could be found, and tempers could settle down enough to get people back to the discussion table.

Dan helped 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. 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 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 up 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.

*By: Kate Winckler, CESA 6*