PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: INFLUENCE CRITICAL DECISIONS

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Public Engagement to Influence Critical Decisions for MASB Communications and Marketing Conference

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Public Engagement?

• Critical Decisions
  – Closing a School
  – Cutting the Budget
  – Reconfiguration
  – Consolidating Schools
  – Major change in program/curriculum

• Process for Decision Needs to Include Engagement of Community and Stakeholders

• Board Needs to Approve the Process and Believe in the Process
Overview

• Setting the Stage
• Committee Work
• Planning
• Communication
• Community Forum
• Decision-Making
• Implementation
In all areas of administration, good process, procedures, and systems are critical.

When the decision is based on a good, solid, thorough process, it is easier to defend.

The Board should generally be concerned about the effectiveness of the management system, rather than each individual management decision.

Superintendent must keep the Board informed and must develop effective systems and processes.
Relationships Along the Way

What steps can you take to help you build relationships through a major decision process?

**CARE** – People want you to care about them and their issues.

**DEVELOP TRUST** – Do what you say you will do – over and over.

**BE THERE** – Genuinely and authentically, both mentally and physically. Be there, not only in the moment when conversing, but in the moments of loss, celebrations, socials, and events.

**LEARN NAMES** – Develop a system for remembering names and important things about people
Setting the Stage

• This is administrative work, but Board members can ask good questions, guide, and help superintendent gain resolve

• Ultimately, most big decisions are at the Board level and Board approval is needed

• But, administration can set up a great process and make it easier for the Board

• How can the stage be set?
  – Annual update to staff
  – Showing information and trends in public board meeting
  – Update information to community
Strategizing

• Know your district data and trends
• Gain resolve as leaders as to direction
• Bring in leadership team
• Educate stakeholders
• Decide on a process (In house or use consultant?)
Time Frame for Process

• Determine Board decision process (recommendation, public hearing, decision date)
• Set committee meeting dates (how many and timeline)
• Determine committee decision process
• Layout the structure of the process – Board meetings, committee meetings, key district events, contractual timelines, and implementation process
Open Meetings Act

- Committees that are deliberating towards a decision, even if advisory, should be open to the public
- Major decision committee meetings should be open to the public
- Plan for a public comment period during the meeting
- Minutes should be kept and posted
Committee Make-Up

- Determine who selects committee members and what committee make up will be
- Include representative group of stakeholders
- Parents (not necessarily from buildings potentially affected or level affected)
- Administrators, Board members, Teachers
- Operations and Transportation?
- Superintendent calls and personally invites each committee member if appropriate
Committee Meeting Planning

- Develop Committee Expectations and Guiding Parameters

- Example on closing a school - parameters included keeping secondary boundaries the same, having enrollment equity between schools, considering building capacity, enrollment trends, and unique building features.

- Determine agenda items for each meeting
Name and Purpose of Committee

- Determine the charge and name of the committee and define its purpose.
- The purpose of the **Elementary Building Closure Advisory Committee** is to identify and recommend to the Board of Education on Monday, March 9, 2009 an elementary school to be closed at the end of the 2008-09 school year.
Set Up Norms

- Respect
- Attendance, on time, engaged
- Purpose of committee
- Professionalism when engaging in discussion – allowing others to talk
- Be willing to listen to others
- Trust information received is accurate
- Trust other members
- No grandstanding
- No undermining the work
Sample Committee Agenda

1. Call to Order
2. Introductions and Public Comment
3. Committee Purpose and Expectations
4. Meeting Goal
5. Review Committee Meeting Dates and Timeline
6. District Enrollment and Finance Update
7. Present and Review Binder Information
8. Determine Other Information Needed for Next Meeting
9. Adjournment
Information to Committee

- Every meeting ended with “What else do you need to know? What additional information would you like to have?” BE RESPONSIVE – No problem, we can get that information.

- School Closing Example - Information might include: enrollment history, current, projections, number of lunches served, square footage of classrooms and buildings, how much land available, age of major mechanical systems.
Planning

• Impetus – what is it? What is driving this?
• Data, Economy, Enrollment, Funding, Budget? Be aware of your “window of opportunity”.
• Frame the decision if possible. Such as “which school to close” as opposed to “whether or not to close a school”
• Acceptance level – after setting the stage, this decision-making process should not be a surprise
Board Resolve

• The three month period of the process, you should be strengthening the Board and explaining what is coming.
• Strengthen the board’s resolve to follow the process.
• The planning process is the critical moment, not the “decision” moment.
• Build trust by keeping board informed and by having a good process
Planning Pitfalls

• Choosing a committee that’s not reflective of all the stakeholders
• Not laying groundwork, therefore Board, community, and staff are not with you (stage has not been set)
• Timeline is too loose, too long, up in the air
• End decision process is not well defined (public hearing, discussion, board decision)
Communication

History of Communicating

– State of the District address to each building, PTO, Rotary, Parent Advisory Council, Superintendent’s Advisory Council
– Communicating during decision process
– Special link on website to process
– All committee documents on web the next day
– FAQ on the website during the process
– Email link on process to leadership (respond and then add to FAQ as appropriate)
Communication

- Information to Administrative Team
- Recognizing input (emails, comments from community) at committee meetings
- Periodic Board of Education updates – process update, number of participants, input received)
- Public comment at Board of Ed meetings and committee meetings
- Minutes of the meetings should be kept and also put on website
- Newspaper articles
Community Forum

• Outside of the committee process, you may wish to have an open forum
  – Invitation process
  – Select a neutral facilitator – outside third party or respected community member

• Consider having a panel from committee
  – Questions can be answered by committee members or administration

• Process for collecting questions from audience

• Keep track of questions and add to FAQ on website

• Consider another forum if needed
Communication Pitfalls

• Having a closed process or closed meetings
• Not having a formal structure to get input from community and stakeholders
• Not answering questions directly, avoiding questions that are being asked
• Not keeping the Board well informed during the process - before, during, and after the decision
Planning for the Decision

• Central Office Administration talking about it and getting input – early resolve

• Who makes the decision? Generally, the Board of Education

Be clear about committee’s charge – take action at Board of Education meeting to define this
Decision Time

• Set process and timeline and stick with it
• Be aware of smokescreens put forth by detractors
• Develop rubric for decision if possible
• Criteria – facts and data – thorough
• Committee – Consensus? Thumbs up? Majority (what does that mean?)
Decision-Making Pitfalls

- Not deciding before the process begins what process will be used for deciding
- Not having enough data and information to make the decision
- Not getting the Board to understand the value of sticking with the process
- Listening to smokescreens and avoidance of the decision
EXAMPLES

• Kindergarten Round up – select dates strategically
• Set dates for implementation prior to process beginning and then follow them
• Notification letters out to students / parents the day following the Board meeting
• Communicate the Schools Of Choice process during the closing process
Implementation

EXAMPLES

• Plan welcome and transition activities for staff, students, parents (open houses, assemblies, staff meetings)

• Superintendent to school selected to close the morning following the Board of Ed decision to meet with staff

• Assistant Superintendent for Personnel to school within a week to communicate the staffing process
Implementation

EXAMPLES

• Moving Process
• Staffing Process
• Facility Closure – alternative uses or close it up
• Transportation logistics – new run development
• Smooth opening of the next school year
Implementation Pitfalls

- Thinking you’re done when the decision is made
- Not continuing the level of intensity
- Failing to care for the many details that will need care
  - Little items like care of files: what goes in trash and what is shred
- Not communicating about the implementation process
- Failing to keep all stakeholders informed including the Board
Closing Comments

• The structure and process you create will carry the day.

• Prior planning, thinking, and strategizing will be the key contributing factors to a successful process.

• Public engagement includes the committee process, online opportunities, minutes, follow up, FAQ, and much more.

• The Board will be more likely to approve the decision if they are impressed with the process of engagement.
THANK YOU!

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