



Authentic engagement

LCAPs REQUIRE IT, BUT WHAT DOES AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE?

By Lisa Kopochinski

THE BUZZ WORDS “COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT” ARE BEING HEARD REPEATEDLY IN PRIVATE INDUSTRY AND MARKETING CIRCLES. It seems engagement is the be all and end all, no matter the sector. And that’s certainly the case for school districts that are now tasked with creating strong community connections as part of recent state mandates.

But what does community engagement look like, and how can districts know if they’ve successfully wrapped their arms around this elusive goal? It all starts with communication.

“The best school districts ensure they are communicating consistently and regularly with their various audiences in the local community,” says Marci McFadden, chief of communication and engagement for the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, a CASBO organizational member.

Dissected further, the three main components of successfully engaging the community include the ability to listen, take action and share the results.

“Authentic community engagement is about doing,” stresses McFadden. “Going out into the community, providing information, soliciting feedback and developing mechanisms where the community can provide input and perspective on the district’s priorities.”

Authentic engagement

She cites a specific example of successful engagement where the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District coordinated update meetings to share with the Board of Education and the community the progress it was making toward its Local Control and Accountability (LCAP) goals. The district also is repurposing its information through its monthly newsletter to the community, on its website and through social media channels.

LCAP: A brief background

In 2013, California adopted historic legislation to change how K-12 public education is funded. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) – which is based on principles of equity, flexibility and transparency – allows educators to be more responsive to the needs of their students. Along with this increase in flexibility and local control, local educational agencies (LEAs) are required to prepare LCAPs, which describe how agencies intend to meet annual goals for all pupils. The LCAP is a three-year plan that must be updated annually and requires the school district to engage parents, students and community members.

Parental involvement is vital to successful engagement between the school and community. On its website, The California Endowment – a private health foundation that provides grants to community-based organizations throughout the state – reports that having increased parent involvement and communication has been shown to improve student attitude, on-task behavior, homework completion rates and levels of class participation. Parent involvement is particularly important for students who are English learners and for those from low-income families – two of the groups for whom LCFF specifically aims to improve outcomes.

Senator Carol Liu, who represents District 25 (which includes numerous areas of Los Angeles), says the shift to LCFF for California's public schools represents a commitment to education equity that recognizes that foster youth, low-income students and English language learners need additional resources to achieve their college and career dreams.

"The ultimate goal is to close the achievement gap and assure access for all students to a quality education, with an emphasis on the whole child," Liu says.

Since the 2013-14 school year, all of California's 1,000 school districts have developed LCAPs with community input to determine how best to use state funding.

"We need parents, students, teachers and community members to help drive LCAP priorities," says Liu.

LCAP requirements

Trent Allen is senior director of community relations for the San Juan Unified School District in Sacramento, a CASBO organizational member. He says community engagement is about raising ideas for consideration, using the power of multiple perspectives to help make the best decisions and ensuring that the diverse needs of the entire community are addressed.

"The LCAP process has asked schools to become smarter about identifying the diversity within their communities, engaging in meaningful forms of two-way communication with the goal of helping to ensure focused equity within our education systems that can help to close the achievement gaps we see between groups of students."

Terry Koehne, chief communications officer for CASBO organizational member Contra Costa County Office of Education, calls community engagement a cornerstone for school districts in the development of their LCAPs. He sees LCAPs as an opportunity for meaningful and strategic planning.

"Attaching your goals and objectives to how you spend your money is what connects the LCAP and the LCFF. For decades, the school funding process and formula was something only seasoned school business officers – and maybe nuclear physicists – could understand." The new formula is intended to bring equity and simplicity back to school finance, with more resources logically aimed at students who are at risk and cost more to educate.

"This is a major change, but what better time to involve the local community in the decision-making process? Schools should be the hub of the community, and that community stretches beyond the classroom walls. They need to be informed and involved."

So, what is the most effective way for a school district to engage the community?

"This is a classic marketing question, and the answer is always two-pronged," says Terilyn Finders, director of communications and legislative affairs for Fagen Friedman & Fulfrost, an education law firm and CASBO Premier Partner with offices in Los Angeles and San Diego. "First, you must do your research to identify where your message has the best chance of getting



through to the target audience. Second, what tool you will use to deliver the message.”

The first question is best examined by considering the “teachable, reachable factor.” Finders suggests that school districts should focus on parent groups and consider when they are most teachable.

“A great example is kindergarten parent orientation,” she offers. “Typically, superintendents or a senior staff member will greet this group of eager and excited parents, welcome them to the district and take one of the first steps toward building the school-home partnership. This is a great place to discuss the district’s vision, mission and goals and how parents can engage in the LCAP planning process.”

Koehne agrees because community engagement involves more than just one-way communication, and “parents and communities relate to their schools more than the district. And they relate more to the teacher than the principal. Having a district plan that truly supports two-way communication between schools, parents and community is a great start.”

Ways to authentically engage

Community engagement can happen a number of ways and can include everything from the “traditional” – town hall meetings,

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one-on-one conversations and paper fliers – to social media such as Facebook, Twitter and different apps.

“Don’t let perfect stand in the way of good,” stresses McFadden. “Just get out there and start engaging and perfect the process as you go along. It’s about being visible and constantly communicating every opportunity you get to show the positive work going on in the district, the schools and with students and staff.” But, she adds, it’s important to continually push information out so the community feels connected. One newsletter or third-party ambassador doesn’t cut it.

What works best for community engagement in San Juan USD is having individuals who are willing to listen, act on what is heard and share the outcomes publicly. That starts with identifying the different groups within the community and assessing the best ways to reach each of them. Take high school students, for example.

“A social media campaign, survey or online form would collect input if you can get their attention. But this feedback is likely

to be surface level,” Allen warns. “We’ve employed student listening circles that offer an opportunity for students to engage via in-depth conversation around a topic, while the adults in the room are able to listen only.”

For its second-year LCAP implementation, San Juan USD went back to some of the same students to hold another listening circle and asked about actions that had been implemented to help gauge its effectiveness and needed changes.

“The result has been authentic and thoughtful voices that give educators, parents and community leaders better insight into students’ perspectives, needs and day-to-day life,” he says.

Devin Vodicka, Ed.D., superintendent of schools for CASBO organizational member Vista Unified School District, knows that extensive planning is required to organize and execute a successful community engagement effort. That’s why Vista USD has a designated lead administrator who heads the engagement process, but “even so, it takes an entire team of leaders who are committed to openness, transparency and genuine engagement,” he says. “All of our departments need to be willing to allow the process to inform our next steps and possibly take us in directions we had not anticipated.”

For Vodicka, authentic engagement requires a genuine commitment and must be an ongoing process that becomes part of the district. Trust must top the list.

“Trust has four elements – consistency, compassion, competence and communication – which are evident in successful engagement efforts throughout the state. Where those elements exist, relational trust will grow and the community bonds will be strengthened. Where there are gaps in those elements, the opposite will occur.”

Adds Finders, “The key’s to shifting from compliance to authentic engagement is to leave plenty of time to consider the input and relinquish total control. If your LCAP outreach process demonstrates that you put students at the heart of all decisions – by effectively offering the ‘why’ (how it benefits students and staff) and not just the ‘what’ (your goals) – you are taking a big step toward creating shared vision and trust.”

And the rewards are invaluable. Firmly establishing trust with the community will help a school district find solutions or seize an opportunity, particularly during challenging times such as a school-based crisis, bond measure or negotiations with the teachers’ union.

“Each and every day, districts must look for opportunities to make deposits in the goodwill bank by engaging in transparency,

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thoughtful conversations and true engagement that allow us to build relationships,” Allen notes. “Then, when something does go wrong, we have built up that reserve and the trust needed for stakeholders to remain engaged and help us find solutions.”

To create a year-round dialog, Koehne suggests that districts use their LCAPs as their stories and then create plans to tell those stories. Just remember that as the LCAP changes or evolves, so will the story. But as long as districts remain committed to a comprehensive approach to communicating, the engagement will be ongoing.

Adds Vodicka: “Together, we can do great things for children. Alone, we don’t stand a chance. That same construct is true for communities as well, which is why we need to embrace the opportunities for genuine engagement.” ■■■

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