

10 Principles of Authentic Community Engagement



It is common for education stakeholders to assert the need for community engagement in schools. In fact, the term “community engagement” has become something of a buzzword. But what does it really mean? How does it work? *Authentic* community engagement re-establishes the connection between schools and communities, creating more effective schools and healthier neighborhoods. Done well, authentic community engagement leads to schools that are central to the life and learning of the entire community and that embody community values. In addition, community engagement fosters community ownership of schools and education reform, helping to sustain important school improvements. Based on the experience of KnowledgeWorks Foundation and others, the following 10 guiding principles are critical. Authentic community engagement:

- 1 Involves all sectors of the community.** Important stakeholders come from all segments of the community, including parents, teachers, students, neighbors, businesses, community-based organizations, and others. Schools perform best when all stakeholders are involved.
- 2 Asks the community to engage on important questions and acknowledges its views and contributions.** It also connects with and influences official decisions. Authentic community engagement is not about getting a community to “buy-in” to a decision that has already been made. It is about soliciting community input to inform and make local decisions.
- 3 Involves the community early in the process.** In order for community members to provide input and become educated on the subject at hand, they should be involved early in the process.
- 4 Offers opportunities for people to gather at convenient and comfortable locations at a variety of convenient times.** Community meetings should not be held solely at schools. There are numerous places where community members are already accustomed to gathering. Potential spaces include a favorite local restaurant, church, or community member’s home.
- 5 Consists of more than one meeting and allows time in the process to make informed judgments.** While opinions can be developed quickly, it takes time over multiple meetings to form judgments on significant courses of action that are based on a community’s value system and a solid understanding of the relevant information. Time between meetings is critical to digesting previous discussions and information in order to inform future discussions and decisions.
- 6 Is driven by aspirations that communities hold for their future.** Rather than centering on others’ ideas about what will be important to a community, a community’s values and aspirations should inform discussion and action.
- 7 Has a learning component that helps build community awareness and knowledge around the subject at hand.** Communities can make better decisions if they have access to current research and local information.
- 8 Allows for sustained involvement by community stakeholders.** Authentic community engagement encourages stakeholders to remain involved in the implementation of decisions and in future school issues. Authentic community engagement creates a sense of ownership within a community, which is a key factor in sustaining school improvement efforts.
- 9 Utilizes community partnerships and expertise.** Community-based organizations are often particularly well-suited to assist schools in leading and facilitating the community engagement process due to their established credibility in a community and ability to engender trust. These organizations often understand a community’s unique needs, aspirations, and context.
- 10 Employs clear, open, and consistent communication.** Schools, their partnering community engagement organizations, and community members must be open and honest with each other in order to build the trust that is essential to this process. The goals and purposes of the initiative must be made clear to all. The engagement process, decision steps, meeting protocols, and commonly used language and terminology should be understood by all stakeholders.

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