

VOLUME IV IN A SERIES

New Relationships With Schools

ORGANIZATIONS THAT BUILD COMMUNITY
by Connecting With Schools

Based on Inquiry and Analysis Conducted for the Kettering Foundation

COLLABORATIVE

COMMUNICATIONS GROUP



COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

Collaborative Communications Group is a strategic consulting firm that builds the capacity of individuals, organizations and networks to work collaboratively to create solutions that are better than any single entity could produce on its own. Through strategic consulting, dialogue and convening, creation of publications and tools, and community conversations, Collaborative helps organizations and networks to identify, share and apply what they know in ways that increase productivity and effectiveness. The ultimate objective of Collaborative's work is the improvement of the quality of public education and community life.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Executive Summary | 2 |
| <hr/> | |
| New Relationships With Schools | 4 |
| <hr/> | |
| Core Beliefs | 8 |
| <hr/> | |
| The Benefits of Conversation-Based Engagement | 12 |
| <hr/> | |
| The Challenges to Conversation-Based Engagement | 16 |
| <hr/> | |
| Three Key Lessons | 20 |
| <hr/> | |
| Conclusion | 24 |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past four years, Collaborative Communications Group, with the support of the Kettering Foundation, has studied organizations around the country that have sought to strengthen their communities by working with schools to improve public education. During the course of our examination, we noticed that a subset of the organizations we studied had pursued a particular strategy for engaging the public—a strategy that might be called “conversation-based,” or deliberative, engagement. Under this strategy, these groups organize and facilitate a series of conversations with a broad range of community members to elicit their hopes and aspirations for the schools, with the goal of influencing educational policy and practice.

In this report we examine five organizations:

- Foundation for Orange County Public Schools Inc., Orlando, Florida
- Good Shepherd Services, New York City, New York
- Heights Community Congress, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
- Mobile Area Education Foundation in Mobile, Alabama
- San Francisco Education Fund, San Francisco, California

CORE BELIEFS

Despite their differences, these organizations took on conversation-based engagement because they share the following beliefs about community voice:

- Community voice has value
- Conversation is powerful
- Strong school systems build strong communities
- Building and sustaining a credible voice for all segments of the community is essential to the success of conversation engagement

THE BENEFITS OF CONVERSATION-BASED ENGAGEMENT

Leaders of these organizations see a number of benefits of this approach for their communities. Conversation-based engagement produces these valuable results:

- Provides a means for wider participation in educational decision-making
- Broadens community involvement in schools
- Strengthens and transforms the organizations themselves

THE CHALLENGES TO CONVERSATION-BASED ENGAGEMENT

All of the organizations we examined faced significant challenges that made their task difficult and sometimes limited what they could accomplish. Yet the organizations believe that the benefits of the work far outweigh the difficulties. These are the primary challenges they face in using this approach:

- Overcoming operational and logistical hurdles in facilitating conversation-based engagement
- Translating engagement into action

THREE KEY LESSONS

This study showed that successful engagement requires organizations to bring three elements to the work:

- A deep and abiding commitment to the process
- A strong relationship with many segments of the community
- Careful planning

Furthermore, the success of this type of engagement depends on local factors. A community's experience in engagement, local politics and its recent history have a bearing on whether citizens want to participate in, and whether the school system is prepared to act on, the results of community-wide dialogue. The issues might be similar from community to community, but each will have a different response to these issues, depending on the community's population and its goals.

ORGANIZATIONS THAT BUILD COMMUNITY *by Connecting With Schools*

VOLUME IV IN A SERIES

Over the past four years, Collaborative Communications Group, with the support of the Kettering Foundation, has studied organizations around the country that have sought to strengthen their communities by working with schools to improve public education. Many of these organizations started out by working in another area of public policy, such as housing or justice, but recognized that educational quality is linked to other community goals. Other organizations had their roots in education but sought to involve community members more directly in educational policy and practice.

During the course of our examination, we and our partners at Kettering noticed that a subset of the organizations we studied had pursued a particular strategy for engaging the public—a strategy that might be called “conversation-based,” or deliberative, engagement. Under that strategy, these groups organize and facilitate a series of conversations with a broad range of community members to elicit their hopes and aspirations for the schools, with the goal of influencing educational policy and practice.

This strategy holds promise both for broadening community engagement in schools and for helping to ensure that school policies reflect community goals. The Kettering Foundation and Collaborative Communications Group have worked to increase the use of deliberative, conversation-based community engagement because we believe it not only strengthens impact, but it also strengthens democracy. Thus, we wanted to know more about the organizations that have pursued this strategy, and how they went about their engagement efforts. Then, we surmised, we could suggest lessons for other communities that might consider this approach.

We examined five organizations:

- Foundation for Orange County Public Schools, Inc., Orlando, Florida
- Good Shepherd Services, New York City, New York
- Heights Community Congress, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
- Mobile Area Education Foundation, Mobile, Alabama
- San Francisco Education Fund, San Francisco, California

The results of our investigation are presented in this report. We explore the values that led these organizations to pursue the approach of conversation-based engagement. We then analyze their efforts to determine whether they yielded the benefits the organizations' leaders had hoped they would, as well as the challenges they faced in realizing their goals.

This report is not meant to be definitive. It is based on a subjective analysis of only five organizations, some of which are new to conversation-based engagement. Nevertheless, it offers insight into a promising avenue to engage communities in education.

Community Engagement

In recent years, educators, funders and policy-makers have been paying greater attention to the role of the community in education reform. In the 1990s, for example, the Annenberg Challenge grants to improve public education in a number of communities provided substantial roles for community organizations to administer the funds and provide support to schools. Similarly, Schools for a New Society, an effort funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York to redesign high schools, required each of its seven participating school districts to engage a community organization as a core partner.

A number of school districts have also launched formal or informal partnerships with community organizations. Many have tried a variety of ways, such as creating new staff positions, to reach out to the community and engage families and community members in schools.

However, the phrase “community engagement” has come to mean many things, and educators and community groups often have differing views of what community engagement should accomplish. Frequently, educators approach community engagement as a one-way conversation: educators inform the community about what they are doing. These efforts have accelerated in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which requires districts and states to develop and disseminate report cards with detailed information on student achievement, teacher quality, school safety and other factors to give communities more information about their schools.

Such efforts to provide information have made district operations and performance more visible than in the past, and they have contributed to greater public awareness of school strengths and challenges. Greater awareness can, in turn, provide greater power to parents and community members in improving education. Yet these one-way efforts have not always been effective. Hearings conducted

by Public Education Network in 2006, for example, found that many parents believed that schools have failed to provide timely or accessible reports under NCLB.

Moreover, these one-way efforts do little to foster in parents and the public a sense of ownership of the schools. Parents and community members are simply informed about policies they had little hand in developing, and about results they can do little to improve.

To involve parents and community members in genuine engagement, some schools and districts have sought out community voices in developing and shaping policies and practices. Often, though, these efforts have been limited to soliciting the involvement of prominent community stakeholders, such as business leaders and active parents. While such voices are critical, they do not ensure that all members of the community, particularly many of those most directly affected by school policies and practices, will play a role in school improvement.

Why is broad involvement important? One reason is legitimacy. Often, parents—particularly those in low-income areas—feel that education reform is done *to* them, rather than *with* them. And they know schools have served their children poorly in the past. As a result, these parents tend to view reforms with skepticism. By participating in the shaping and implementation of reforms, however, parents and community members feel ownership of these reforms and are more likely to support the reforms in the face of opposition and criticism.

A second reason for community involvement is sustainability. The rapid turnover of urban superintendents is well known. New superintendents tend to try to put their own stamp on a district. Previous reforms, even ones that were successful, often get pushed aside. Community involvement, though, can help ensure that reforms withstand changes in leadership and remain in place long enough to produce results.

A third reason for broad-based community involvement is expanded resources that community members can provide toward education. Educators and community members increasingly recognize that improving academic achievement is not a job for schools alone. Why not take advantage of all the resources available in a community? Community members can volunteer in schools; they can offer internships and job-shadowing opportunities for students; they can provide learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Communities can also provide financial support to schools. And engaged communities are more likely to provide the needed resources.

To foster broad community engagement in schools, community-based organizations have tried a number of strategies described in previous volumes of the *New Relationships With Schools* series. Some groups organize community members to advocate for reforms. Several of these organizing efforts have produced significant improvements. But these approaches can create adversarial relationships between communities and schools that threaten long-term sustainability. Also, organizing efforts tend to focus on a specific component of reform, rather than reform in general. When this happens, community interest in reform might plummet once the issue is resolved. And if the issue is not resolved in the way community members envision, they may be hesitant to participate in future organizing efforts.

Other groups have focused their efforts on providing services in schools. By offering after-school programs or health services on school campuses, these groups have connected community members to schools. However, these efforts have not necessarily engaged community members in the development or implementation of programs. And few have addressed the core issues of schooling, such as teacher quality, curriculum or student engagement in learning.

A Third Strategy: Conversation-Based Engagement

A small group of community-based organizations have tried a third strategy for broad engagement: conversation-based engagement. These efforts are aimed at giving voice to community members' hopes and aspirations for schools—and helping to ensure that these beliefs inform policy and practice. The five organizations studied for this report have used variations of this approach. And despite numerous challenges, participants believe that these efforts have benefited young people, communities and the organizations themselves.

The Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) was one of the first organizations to attempt community-based engagement on a large scale. In Mobile, the effort began as a way to follow up on a tax increase adopted by local voters—the first tax increase for schools in Mobile County in 40 years. According to Rhonda Neal-Waltman, a former assistant superintendent who now works for MAEF, the vote was a “yes, but” vote: Yes, county residents supported additional funding for the schools, but they wanted to see changes.

To determine what kinds of changes residents wanted, MAEF led a conversation-based effort to allow local citizens to express their vision for the qualities in young people they wanted in the community, as well as their hopes and aspirations for the schools that would produce such young people. These conversations resulted in a community agreement that was adopted unanimously by the school board. MAEF then followed up the initial engagement with a series of conversations in 2006.

Good Shepherd Services' engagement efforts centered in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. Cut off by a freeway, Red Hook is isolated from the rest of Brooklyn, and access to services is limited. The conversations organized by Good Shepherd revealed the need for recreation, health

and other services in Red Hook. In response, Good Shepherd won a grant to establish a “Beacon,” which provides health and social services on school sites.

In addition, Good Shepherd facilitated a series of conversations about violence in and around schools, after a school principal was shot and killed while searching the neighborhood for an absent student. As a result of the conversations, the community established a youth court to adjudicate disputes.

Heights Community Congress (HCC) had a history of holding conversations about race relations and other social-justice issues in Cleveland Heights and surrounding communities. After receiving a grant from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, an Ohio-based education-reform organization, the Cleveland Heights school district asked HCC to lead a public-engagement effort around the plan to reorganize Heights High School into smaller units.

The Foundation for Orange County Public Schools undertook a conversation-based engagement effort when the organization shifted from providing grants to individual schools to a broader focus on community engagement. The Foundation hopes that the resulting community agreement will provide the framework for a district strategic plan.

Similarly, the **San Francisco Education Fund** (Ed Fund) also shifted its focus from grant-making to engagement. The school district sought the Ed Fund's assistance in engaging the community around issues of student enrollment, recruitment and retention. The Ed Fund formed a partnership with another local group, the Parent Advisory Council, which had a large network of parents, to help conduct the conversations.

CORE BELIEFS

The five organizations came to conversation-based engagement from different directions. Heights Community Congress, for example, had a long history as a fair-housing and civil rights organization that had a track record in facilitating conversations among local residents around sensitive issues. The school system sought the group's expertise and experience when it agreed to engage the community around a plan to reorganize Heights High School into smaller units.

By contrast, the Foundation for Orange County Public Schools had long been intimately connected with the schools. The organization believed that it could have a bigger impact if it shifted its focus from providing grants for school projects to engaging the community as a whole and addressing system-wide issues.

Despite their different backgrounds, the organizations share a number of beliefs about community engagement that led them to take on this community-based work. These beliefs include the following:

- Community voice is valuable
- Conversation is powerful
- Strong school systems build strong communities
- Creating change requires building and sustaining a credible voice for all people

These Community Organizations, Particularly Their Executive Directors, Share Deeply Held Beliefs About The Value Of Community Voice.

For all of the organizations studied, enabling community members to express their voices is not just a strategy, it is part of what they value and the way they structure their own organization's work. These beliefs go to the heart of the organizations. They are not government agencies; they are nonprofit organizations operating on the premise that community members should play a vital role in supporting and building the community. And they believe that community engagement in education will strengthen schools.

Heights Community Congress is a good example. Started as a fair-housing agency, HCC conducts regular dialogues among city residents on race relations to help ensure that Cleveland Heights remains a vibrant, racially integrated city. "We value diversity and community building. We value community engagement and involvement," says Kasey Greer, the group's executive director. "Routinely—monthly—we hold community dialogues around issues of importance. The main theme is to try to provide opportunities for people to interact with one another. We've been fairly successful at it."

The organizations also believe in listening deeply to understand what is beneath opinions. Ruth Grabowski, director of the Parent Advisory Council, which worked with the San Francisco Education Fund on that city's engagement effort, says conversations provide ways for citizens to probe issues. "A paper survey gives you a superficial answer, not the real answer," she says. "When we went in with questions, things would come up that we didn't think of before. If you ask what's important to you, people might say 'safety.' You could check a box and say 'safety is a concern.' But if you ask what that means, you hear a lot of different things. It doesn't necessarily mean more security guards."

The organizations also place stock in community voice as a way of empowering community members to take responsibility for improving their own communities. For example, Good Shepherd Services operates from what its officials call a "strength-based" perspective. Rather than seeing low-income families as deprived, Good Shepherd hopes to build on the assets the families already have to enable them to succeed. "If you give people the resources they need, they can flourish often," says Kathy Gordon, Good Shepherd's assistant executive director for community-based programs in Brooklyn. "We have a belief in the right to self-determination—the right to make choices in communities."

The organizations also believe that community voice is particularly important in education because "the public schools are the public's schools," says Carolyn Akers, executive director of the Mobile Area Education Foundation. "My work is to make those connections between the institution and the people."

The Foundation for Orange County Public Schools pursued conversation-based engagement as a way of addressing system-wide issues. In the past, the Foundation had given grants to individual teachers and schools, but the group wanted to make a broader impact on education in the county, according to Nancy Peed, executive director. "The [Foundation] board was frustrated," she says. "They had been putting millions into the district, and they knew they were impacting groups of kids. What can they do to impact the district? They sent me to do research. I found that the districts that made the greatest progress found ways to involve the public."

"We value diversity and community building. We value community engagement and involvement."

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These Community Organizations Believe In The Power Of Conversations.

In contrast to community organizing, which can result in confrontations between community members and school officials, conversation-based engagement tries to strengthen relationships for ongoing work. Although some of the organizations that followed the conversation-based approach have conducted organizing as well, many of the leaders believe that conversations and relationship building are worthwhile ends in themselves.

Martha Goble, the former executive director of Heights Community Congress, says the dialogues do not necessarily have to lead to change in order to be successful. “We were not looking to create change,” she says. “It’s to keep people comfortable with what was happening to them. It was more, ‘talk about what’s going on.’ That’s enough to sustain people.”

Hugh Vasquez, the executive director of the San Francisco Education Fund, says a consensus is more likely to produce lasting change than a plan developed as a result of pressure from organized groups. “Traditional organizing has a place. I support those activities,” he says. “But I do believe that a combination of organizing with partnership and leadership is quicker, stronger and longer lasting than pressure only. If you put pressure only, you’re going to get a lot of resistance. You’re not going to get reform that moves quickly.”

These Community Organizations Believe That Strong School Systems Build Strong Communities.

Three of the organizations studied (MAEF, Foundation for Orange County Public Schools and the Ed Fund) began as education organizations and have long been committed to the goal of strengthening schools to build stronger communities. The other two started in other fields but moved to work with schools because of their understanding of the connection between education and community strength.

Sister Paulette LoMonaco, executive director of Good Shepherd Services, describes that connection:

When we first began work with high-need communities, we initiated our work with counseling centers. It was evident that so many families coming into the centers were struggling to find positive school experiences. The most effective way to work with young people was to place ourselves where they were—in the public schools. We were best able to help immigrant families and single-parent families make connections to the community by placing ourselves in public schools.

Goble of Heights Community Congress says that her organization also recognized the connection between strong schools and strong communities, but says the schools, until recently, were reluctant to confront community concerns. “Schools are the arena where the most difficult aspects of living harmoniously in an integrated community get played out,” she says. “We’ve tried to work with the schools to address the issue of diversity. Schools didn’t want to do that. They had other issues on their agenda. They were closed off.”

These Community Organizations Believe That Building And Sustaining A Credible Voice For All Segments Of The Community Is Essential To Their Ability To Do Their Work.

These groups are connected both to people at the grass roots level and to those in traditional positions of power. The connections have helped win them confidence from the people they convene to conduct the conversations and from school officials who need to be connected to community engagement.

For example, Greer of HCC says the school system sought out her organization to organize an engagement effort because of its experience with convening broad groups of people for conversations about critical issues in the community. “We are recognized in the community as a community engagement organization. Our roots lie in bringing folks together,” she says.

But some leaders worry that the relationship between their organization and the schools could change if schools reject the work of the engagement efforts and consensus turns to confrontation. “We have a good relationship with the school system, particularly the board and superintendent,” says Katie Albright, former policy director for the San Francisco Education Fund. “We consider ourselves ‘critical friends’ of the school district. However, because we have programs in the schools, we have to be concerned about pushing too hard on the critical part of our relationship in order to sustain our school programs.”

“I found that the districts that made the greatest progress found ways to involve the public.”

THE BENEFITS OF CONVERSATION-BASED ENGAGEMENT

The successes of these organizations have in many ways validated their beliefs. They went into conversation-based engagement believing that it would provide a means for citizens to bring their voices to education policy and practice, and they emerged convinced that the efforts succeeded. They believe that the school system, their organization and the communities themselves are stronger as a result.

Perhaps the most significant indicator of the effectiveness of these efforts is the fact that all of the organizations say that they plan to continue or expand conversation-based efforts. Their work thus far has convinced leaders in the organizations of its value.

Organization leaders see that conversation-based engagement produces these valuable results:

- Provides a means for wider participation in educational decision-making
- Broadens community involvement in schools
- Strengthens and transforms the organizations themselves

“It went from being an event to a movement. The [school] board had to take notice. The people who were there to present to the board were not the usual suspects; they were grocery store owners, barbers—regular folks.”

Conversation-Based Engagement Provides A Means For Wider Participation In Educational Decision-Making.

Community engagement is based on the idea that all citizens with a stake in education deserve a place at the table when decisions are made. Some traditional engagement efforts, such as advisory councils, are often too limited; they rarely reach beyond community elites or the most active parents and community members.

Conversation-based efforts have succeeded in drawing participation from a wide range of community members—from the grass roots to the “grass tops” (the influentials, those with money and authority). Securing such participation has often proved challenging, but persistent efforts can bring a broad range of stakeholders to the table.

In Mobile, for example, Neal-Waltman describes how citizens have become empowered as a result of that community’s engagement efforts:

When it turned into a community agreement, 500 people came to a board meeting. I was sitting at the board table. It went from being an event to a movement. The board had to take notice. The people who were there to present to the board were not the usual suspects; they were grocery store owners, barbers—regular folks. Elected officials saw people they knew saying, “This is what we want from you.”

Gigi Armbrecht, chair of the MAEF board, notes that this kind of involvement and commitment is a powerful tool for ensuring the legitimacy of public

policy decisions. “We had so much more credibility when we went to the school system and the board to say, ‘This is what needs to be done.’ Board members are political beings—they’re elected. If they did what the public wanted, it would be better received than if they ignored it.”

In some cases, to create strong connections between community members and school issues the conversation facilitators had to convince community members of their value to the discussion. In Orange County, Florida, where fewer than 20 percent of residents have children or grandchildren in schools, many community members who are not parents or grandparents of school-aged children were initially unsure why they should contribute their voice. Although to Kim Cornett, who served on the steering committee for that community’s engagement effort, explained, “In the conversations, as they talked about their hopes, dreams and aspirations for the community, and their hopes, dreams and aspirations for the schools, a light bulb went on. They saw they were linked, and they saw how to take responsibility for doing something about it.”

Additionally, organizations saw a “spillover effect”: The sense of empowerment extended beyond the initial conversations. In many cities, people began to feel that they had the right to speak out on education issues, and they exercised that right in a powerful way. As Akers puts it, residents “see they have something they are going to lose—they don’t want to lose it.”

Conversation-based efforts have succeeded in drawing participation from a wide range of community members from the grass roots to the “grass tops.”

Mobile residents showed their newfound empowerment in a dramatic way. In March 2006, the school board decided not to renew the contract of Harold Dodge, the superintendent who had led the reforms that resulted from the community conversations. In response, hundreds of community members showed up at the board meeting to protest the decision. In the end, the board reversed their decision and instead extended Dodge’s contract. “This community is used to being heard—not only being heard, but seeing what they value put into action,” says Neal-Waltman.

A similar thing happened in Orange County. The county commission adopted a zoning law that would have resulted in more overcrowding in local schools. The Foundation sent an e-mail to 4,000 people the night before a commission meeting, and residents packed the hall. The commission agreed to revise the earlier law and place a limit on school capacity.

Orange County experienced a spillover effect in another way as well. In one community in the district, Ocoee, the school board adopted the agreement that resulted from the conversations. Participants are now working to implement it.

Conversation-Based Engagement Broadens Community Involvement In Schools.

In addition to involving stakeholders in education decision-making, the conversations have fostered greater involvement in schools by a broad range of community members. In some cases, this occurred because community members became aware of schools and their needs; in other cases schools recognized that community members represented a powerful, but largely untapped, resource.

MAEF’s Armbrecht points out that in Mobile, the conversations enable residents to compare school policies and practices to their collective vision for the school system. “We knew how valuable those types of conversations were,” she explains. “If we could go to the public and show them things were happening that they wanted to see happen, we’d be more likely to see [funding] increases in the future. At the same time, we got more people interested in what’s happening in the schools.”

Going beyond general public support, Greer of HCC says school-business partnerships have sprouted now that business leaders are more aware of the schools and their needs. “It was much less common [20 years ago] for a small business to approach a principal, looking for after-school help,” she says. “That’s a result of community engagement efforts. There’s lots of room for improvement, but it’s a start.”

In Mobile, the engagement process also led to greater student engagement in schools. The Mobile Area Education Foundation hired a local graduate who has led an effort in which students investigate and report on the quality of their schools. “They’ve

taken on such big issues as equity,” says Neal-Waltman. “Things weren’t equitable. Students knew that if they went to High School A they would not get to take the same courses they could in High School F. They started an equity project, in which students audit course offerings and success. One hundred students worked on that. They developed questions about the quality of instruction, the safety of the environment. Now they’re taking the equity work deeper. Students feel more connected and they feel valued.”

Conversation-Based Engagement Strengthens And Transforms The Organizations Themselves.

The organizations that conducted the conversation-based engagement efforts have benefited from the process as much as communities have. They have higher visibility and credibility within their communities, which has led to more interest in their work. Some have re-evaluated their missions and strategies to focus more on engagement.

These engagement efforts have also helped to validate organizations’ beliefs in community voice and empowerment. For example, while Good Shepherd Services has long valued empowerment, in practice they sometimes viewed participants from a “client perspective,” according to Fran York, director of program development. As a result of the engagement efforts, however, the organization’s practices are more closely in line with its values, she says.

The visibility of the engagement efforts has created additional demand, too, according to HCC’s Greer. “Even if we didn’t want to, we wouldn’t have a choice. People call us,” she says. “Because we value community building, that’s such a key piece. Schools are a key part of the community, so we plan on finding ways of staying involved.”

Similarly, the Mobile Area Education Foundation has expanded its engagement work to other areas of the state. The organization has been contacted by other Alabama communities that have heard about its work in Mobile and want to hold similar conversations in their communities.

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THE CHALLENGES TO CONVERSATION-BASED ENGAGEMENT

Although the benefits of conversation-based engagement are substantial, all of the organizations faced significant challenges that made their work difficult and, in some cases, limited what they could accomplish. However, the fact that all of the organizations plan to continue and expand this work suggests that they have learned how to overcome the challenges, and that the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. These are the primary challenges they face in using this approach:

- Overcoming operational and logistical hurdles in facilitating conversation-based engagement
- Translating engagement into action

Organizations Face Operational And Logistical Challenges In Facilitating Conversation-Based Engagement.

These organizations learned that conversation-based engagement is complex and highly labor-intensive. The logistical hurdles taxed some organizations and sometimes affected the results.

One of the most significant challenges was at the heart of the endeavor: reaching out to a broad spectrum of the community. All of the organizations wanted to ensure that all stakeholders, not just the activists who have traditionally been at the table for education-policy discussions, participated in the conversations. Yet achieving such broad outreach was difficult.

Sandra Haynes, who led the effort for Heights Community Congress, notes that it is difficult under any circumstances to bring people out for discussions on public issues. “Cleveland Heights is just full of busy people,” she says. “Their hearts were there. But if they are parents, with kids in school, they have to go to [school events]. If they are involved in other organizations, they have meetings. No matter what the time of day, it was difficult to get people to come.”

Some organizations, such as the San Francisco Education Fund, lacked the networks to contact community members. So the Ed Fund formed a partnership with the Parent Advisory Council, a local organization that represented parents in the school system and had access to an extensive network of parents. But forming the partnership

meant that Ed Fund staff had to manage relationships with the Council, as well manage the engagement effort. “There are many organizations that support education in San Francisco,” says Katie Albright. “We want to assure that we’re working together in concert and not stepping on one another’s toes. Sometimes that works well. Sometimes it doesn’t.”

Ruth Grabowski, director of the Parent Advisory Council, adds that the organizations were unable to reach out to as many partners as they had hoped. “At the beginning, when we had a sense that there was a short timeline and things were done very much at the last minute, we excluded some groups who would have been partners,” she says. “So we haven’t reached certain constituencies as well as we thought we should. And later, when we asked to include them, they felt they were included as an afterthought. That’s not a great way to have a partnership.”

Even when organizations were able to reach out to broad groups of stakeholders, activists and professionals at times tended to dominate the discussions. This happened especially when conversations were held in schools and large numbers of teachers showed up, notes Armbrecht of MAEF. “People don’t talk. If a teacher is in the room, and you ask a question about education, people will defer every time to the teacher,” she says. Effective conversation facilitation can help manage this problem, but in a large meeting, effective facilitation is difficult.

“[Organizations] felt they were included as an afterthought. That’s not a great way to have a partnership.”

In response, MAEF held separate conversations with teachers and with lay people. “We learned to give teachers and community members their own space to address certain issues,” Armbrecht says.

Perhaps because of the logistical challenges, many of the organizations found that conducting the engagement efforts took longer than they had anticipated, stretching the organizations’ finances. And the extended time made it more difficult to get results. “I wish we could have sped up the process more,” says Peed, of the Foundation for Orange County Public Schools. “I’m not sure how, but I wish we could. I think in the long run it will play out fine, but three years is just a long time.”

“There are many organizations that support education in San Francisco. We want to assure that we’re working together in concert and not stepping on one another’s toes. Sometimes that works well. Sometimes it doesn’t.”

Organizations Face Challenges In Translating Engagement Into Action.

Broad-based community engagement is a different way of doing business in many communities. Most community members are not used to speaking up, and district leaders are not accustomed to listening to community voices before making decisions, let alone integrating those voices into decisions.

The challenge of overcoming resistance from district leaders has been particularly acute in Orange County, where Peed says some district officials have actively resisted the engagement efforts. “There is tremendous resistance,” she says. “The senior management is with us, and we’re also running into cheerleaders. But entrenched bureaucrats are resistant. They don’t want change. It’s just that simple. ‘I’m here, I intend to retire. Leave me alone. Don’t mess with my work.’”

The resistance helps fuel cynicism among the public. Organizations find that some people doubt that the conversations will result in changes, so these people put in a cursory effort. These attitudes might turn around, though, if people see that their efforts make a difference. “People participate in an hour and a half meeting,” says Albright of San Francisco. “However, they don’t know what the follow-up is because at this time there is no follow-up. We are still holding community meetings and analyzing the findings. The proof of the pudding will be how many people come to board meetings, how much play we get in the newspapers, and how receptive school leaders are to what the community says.”

Even in Mobile, where the evidence of the effects of engagement is strong, many people remain unconvinced that their voices can make a difference, says Armbrecht. “Mobile has a low self-image,” she explains. “If you told the story of Mobile, but changed the location to San Francisco, people in Mobile would be envious. They have a hard time believing what they can do.”

To overcome such cynicism and the resistance of school officials, organizations have taken various steps to help ensure that the recommendations emerging from the conversations move to action. Yet these steps have also frequently proved challenging. In some cases, the organization’s existing relationship with the school district makes it difficult for them to step into a new role and propose a change of course.

As Albright puts it, one challenge “is whether or not the board will really listen to the community and make substantial changes. If the board doesn’t act, the next hurdle is whether our organization will have the voice to publicly challenge the board’s inaction. I’m hopeful we will be able to.”

In San Francisco and elsewhere, organizations have attempted to lay the groundwork for school board acceptance by keeping school officials informed during the course of the engagement process. “We’re working directly with district’s senior staff,” Albright says. “Not only do these people end up being the folks who implement the policies, they also develop many of the school district’s policies before reaching the board.”

But she acknowledges that the organization could have done more to lay the groundwork for change in the broader community. “We didn’t do what other communities have done: because we were pressed on time from the beginning of this effort, we didn’t create a steering committee with significant community leaders. We will want to do that at the next phase of our engagement work,” she says.

“The [school district] senior management is with us and we’re also running into cheerleaders. But entrenched bureaucrats are resistant. They don’t want change. It’s just that simple. ‘I’m here, I intend to retire. Leave me alone. Don’t mess with my work.’”

THREE KEY LESSONS

These five organizations have had a good deal of success in pursuing conversation-based engagement. Their track record shows not only that pursuing such a strategy is possible, but that it can also produce results. Yet their challenges demonstrate that achieving success is not easy. They must continually work to ensure that they reach their goals.

This study suggests three key lessons for organizations and others interested in conversation-based engagement. Organizations must:

- Be committed to the process of conversation-based engagement
- Have strong relationships with all segments of the community
- Plan carefully to ensure that the process continues and works effectively

Organizations Must Be Committed To The Process Of Conversation-Based Engagement.

Conversation-based engagement is a painstaking process that can take many months—or years—to carry out. Many of the early steps can be difficult. And the outcome is seldom clear, even near the conclusion of the process.

Moreover, conversation-based engagement requires a leap of faith from organization leaders, and especially from citizens who are participating. All must believe that simple, informal conversations can result in community consensus statements that can influence school district policy and practice. Without a commitment to see the process through and a deep belief that it will produce desired results, it is easy to get discouraged and give up.

The leaders of the five organizations studied all possess a profound belief in the value and efficacy of conversation-based engagement. Some, like those at Heights Community Congress, have a long history of the practice that provides evidence to convince them. Others, like the San Francisco Education Fund, rely on the experience of others, such as Mobile. But all have a genuine dedication to the idea that bringing citizens together to express their hopes and aspirations for schools will result in a stronger community.

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Organizations Must Have Strong Relationships With All Segments Of The Community.

Traditional forms of community engagement tend to focus on particular members of the community who are considered the most important sources of support for schools. Usually, these are prominent stakeholders, such as business leaders, the media and activist parents. But conversation-based engagement aspires to something different. It is aimed at including the voices of the broad community in education policy and practice.

Without careful planning organizations risk taking damaging shortcuts in the process or ending it prematurely. With careful planning and preparation organizations can manage the process effectively and keep participants informed throughout.

To be successful, then, organizations leading engagement efforts must have the credibility that would lead members from all segments of the community, elites as well as the grass roots, all of whom have busy lives, to devote several hours to participate in the process. They must also have the support of school officials who can ensure that the community voices that emerge will receive at least a hearing, if not outright acceptance.

The five organizations featured here have community-wide credibility, but they went about their outreach in different ways, depending both on the community and their own histories and capacities. Heights Community Congress, for example, was recognized in the community as an agency with a strong track record in conversation-based engagement. People were willing to show up at the meetings because of the organization's history, and the school system enlisted Heights Community Congress when it sought to engage the public around the redesign of the high school.

The Foundation for Orange County Public Schools also had a strong relationship with the school system because of its prior grant-making efforts. But the Foundation encountered stiff resistance from district administrators when it embarked on the engagement effort. Still, the Foundation was able to continue with a likelihood of success because of leadership from the community, and support from a majority of the school board as well as top school administrators.

Good Shepherd Services built its credibility from the ground up, by working directly with the community to establish services that were badly needed. This record enabled the organization to reach out to community members to engage them in the development of programs and services for young people.

Organizations Must Plan Carefully To Ensure That The Process Continues And Works Effectively.

All of the organizations we studied are nonprofits with limited budgets and staff capacity. Yet engagement is highly labor-intensive and entails significant costs. Without careful planning, organizations risk taking damaging shortcuts in the process or ending it prematurely.

The intensive labor involved might not be immediately obvious. Organizations have found, for example, that it is not enough simply to post fliers to invite citizens to meetings. People tend to come only when invited, which means that organizations' staff must spend time calling and asking people to attend the conversations. And even then, turnout might be light, requiring additional meetings.

In addition, organizations need skilled facilitators who can draw out the opinions of participants, and the capacity to sift through data and produce reports. Many organizations, particularly those getting involved in engagement for the first time, lack these capacities.

To augment their own capacity, many organizations enlist partner organizations. The San Francisco Education Fund formed a partnership with the Parent Advisory Council and another organization, Parents for Public Schools, to recruit participants. And several of the organizations have worked with

independent consultants and national organizations such as the Kettering Foundation, the Harwood Institute and Collaborative Communications Group to provide technical assistance, strategic support and training.

Despite this assistance, some organizations have found that the process takes far longer than they had anticipated, and they worried about public skepticism as to whether the process would result in change. But with careful planning and preparation, organizations can manage the process effectively and keep participants informed throughout.

Organizations leading engagement efforts must have the credibility that would lead members from all segments of the community, elites as well as the grass roots, all of whom have busy lives, to devote several hours to participate in the process.

CONCLUSION

The five organizations studied for this report are relatively new to the practice of conversation-based engagement in education. Only Mobile has a sufficiently long track record to gauge results. Yet all of the organizations are convinced that the approach is beneficial to communities, schools, the organizations and, ultimately, to young people. Certainly a more finely grained study could examine what those benefits are, and which characteristics are associated with those benefits.

When looking at these organizations, related research and other studies, we see that doing this kind of community engagement is difficult for communities. It does not come naturally. These organizations had a powerful combination of commitment to core values, persistence to see results and a willingness to overcome gaps in knowledge and skills.

Local and national organizations working to expand the practice of productive community engagement should ask these questions:

- How do we create or tap into community voice to foster commitment to engagement efforts?
- How do we develop and support learning and training in the frameworks and skills necessary to do this well?
- Where will we get the resources to do this work well over time?
- What stories can we tell about the value and impact of engagement on schools and communities?

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At Collaborative Communications Group, we continue to work closely with communities and national partners on these engagement issues and we hope that others will join this effort.



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