



Community engagement

Understanding community engagement

Community engagement occurs when a variety of community members are consulted on issues being addressed or affecting their wellbeing or community. Community engagement varies and may involve informing the school community about partnership decisions or processes. At other times it may involve seeking direction from the community on a particular issue.

Community engagement is important because it:

- provides information so that people can inform a decision making process on issues that are important to them,
- gathers community views,
- creates strategies to put these views into action.

Benefits of community engagement

Community engagement provides an opportunity for schools and other organisations to determine whether there is community support for a particular partnership and whether its goals align with the community's values.

Community engagement delivers a number of other benefits including:

- building trust through consultation,
- identifying resources such as people, money and time,
- capturing ideas and expertise from the community,
- generating support for and a desire to participate in a partnership,
- producing partnership goals aligned with community needs.

Developing an effective community engagement plan

When planning and implementing a partnership, engaging the school community early and as often as possible is a key strategy for obtaining support.

Community engagement should take place before critical decisions are made and should also continue throughout the life of a project as required.

The key is to understand who will likely be affected by changes introduced by the partnership and involve them in the design and implementation of those changes. A significant way to build support and to reduce opposition to change is to have a high involvement or participative approach to the partnership.

There are seven principles that underpin effective community engagement planning. These are:

1. Purpose

It is important to gain agreement about why the schools are engaging with their communities, and to give a sense of the duration of the process.

2. Inclusiveness

Communicate and consult with persons involved in and affected by the proposed partnership. Gather expertise from a diverse group has to offer and engage with groups and individuals not traditionally engaged in the school community for reasons such as language, age or mobility.



3. Informed input

Provide consistent and accurate information, in a variety of formats, to those engaged in planning. The language used should be clear and free from jargon and technical terms which can alienate communities and stakeholders.

4. Timeliness

It is important to limit expectations that engaging in planning will bring immediate results, but at the same time, ensure that the outcomes of engagement activities inform regeneration project plans and decision-making.

5. Responsiveness

Explain how the input of the community will be used in the partnership.

Provide transparent responses on requests for information about the partnership, including whether you have sufficient information to respond to the request.

Gather the diversity of interests and views that may exist around a particular issue

6. Evaluation

Continuously evaluate engagement strategies to assess whether goals have been achieved and whether engagement activities have contributed to achieving the partnership's goals. This offers opportunities for improvement, and enhances the credibility of the process.

7. Resourcing

Identify and assign resources that can be contributed to the partnership by the community. The stakeholder engagement plan should include a number of roles and responsibilities specifically for engagement activities e.g. communications coordinator, working groups, facilitators depending upon the activity or strategy required.

Public participation strategies

There are a number of tools and techniques available for consulting, some of which are detailed below. The key to successful community engagement is that those involved are given the opportunity to discuss the broader issues from the perspective of a citizen, i.e. *'what does this mean for our community'* rather than *'what does this mean for me?'*

Brainstorming and workshops

A broad range of creative solutions to issues are harvested through a brainstorming process. Often brainstorming is used as a warm up exercise prior to a workshop or focus group. Once ideas are gathered, the best solutions can be explored by further brainstorming or more conventional analytical methods.

Focus Groups

The key objective of a focus group is to uncover the key issues of concern for stakeholders. The issues that emerge could be later used to develop into a survey or questionnaire to verify findings. Focus groups are relatively inexpensive and can illicit dependable data within a short time frame.

Open house

Is an informal event that provides information and a forum for understanding stakeholder concerns or potential to provide feedback. Open house allows people to drop in and obtain information at their convenience. Often will include display information, presentation material and handouts. Staff are often involved to answer people's questions.

Student Committees

Students are a primary stakeholder group that will be affected by partnership activity. A student committee can provide broad based input into decision making and planning of partnerships.

Dotocracy

Sometimes called dot voting, this is a quick way of determining preferences on a particular initiative. Group discussions often generate a number of ideas, but it is not always simple to know which ones are considered most popular. Generated ideas are recorded on a large piece of paper on the wall. Participants are given a number of sticky dots and asked to put one or more dots on the idea that they most strongly agree with. If families and children and young people are voting, different coloured dots can be distributed to different groups.

Consensus Conference


Aims to provide members of a community, through a public meeting a chance to voice their concerns, increase their knowledge and ability to engage in a discussion, where at the conclusion of the consensus conference an agreement is made by all concerned. Community members have high participation and planning roles.

Websites

Websites can provide information freely and in forms that are easily accessible. They can include partnership plans, announcements, and minutes of meetings or could be used as a participatory tool. Websites are especially useful for people in remote areas wanting to access project information.

Public Participation Spectrum

The following table outlines some strategies a school may wish to adopt in order to consult with or engage its school community. Schools may wish to use a combination of these strategies depending on the activity or purpose for engagement.

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT 			
Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate
<i>Goal:</i> To provide the school community with consistent and accurate information to assist them to understand the rationale for partnership or a particular partnership activity.	<i>Goal:</i> To obtain feedback from the school community on aspects of the partnership, including rationale.	<i>Goal:</i> To work directly with the school community throughout the partnership process to ensure that their concerns and needs are consistently understood and considered.	<i>Goal:</i> To partner with the school community in the development of the project charter, and in the identification of partnership opportunities for the project.
Promise to the school community	Promise to the school community	Promise to the school community	Promise to the school community
We will keep you informed about the development of the partnership.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge your concerns, and provide feedback on how community input influences the types of partnerships undertaken by the school.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and needs are reflected throughout the implementation of partnership, and provide feedback on how your input influenced the types of partnerships undertaken.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating the project and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the regeneration project to the maximum extent possible.
Possible strategies	Possible strategies	Possible strategies	Possible strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School newsletters • Presentations • Phone calls to key community leaders • Street stalls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups • Surveys • Essay competition or debate for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open house • Submissions • School community feedback panels • Forums • Websites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student committees • Consensus conference with student representatives, parents and community leaders • Brainstorming and workshops • Citizen juries

Adapted from the Public Participation spectrum developed by the International Association for Public Participation.

Schools can look at the DEECD Stakeholder Engagement Framework for information about consulting and collaborating. Schools may also wish to establish partnerships with organisation or other government departments (for instance Department of Planning and Community Development Local Teams) that have expertise in community engagement.

More information

- DEECD Stakeholder Engagement Framework (<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/stakeholderengagement.htm>)
- DEECD Innovation in Action: Understanding Community Engagement (www.education.vic.gov.au/researchinnovation/innovatehere/action/engage/default.htm)
- Department of Planning and Community Development - [Local Teams](http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/web14/dvc/dvcmain.nsf/HeadingPagesDisplay/Contact+us#local) (<http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/web14/dvc/dvcmain.nsf/HeadingPagesDisplay/Contact+us#local>)
- [Public Participation Spectrum](http://www.iap2.org) (<http://www.iap2.org>)
- [Department of Sustainability and Environment](http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/effective-engagement) (<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au>) – Effective Community Engagement Workbook (<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/effective-engagement>)
- [School Communications Tool Kit](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schooloperations/commstoolkit.htm) (<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schooloperations/commstoolkit.htm>)
- [Victorian Local Governance Association consultation and engagement resource website:](http://www.vlga.org.au/Resources/Consultation_and_Engagement.aspx) (http://www.vlga.org.au/Resources/Consultation_and_Engagement.aspx)

