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Organizational Training and Relationship Building for Increasing Public Participation in a Public School District

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From the early twentieth century to the present, citizen participation in U.S. public institutions—particularly schools—has continually decreased. The trend has been linked to the bureaucratization of public schools and their increasing reliance on expert knowledge for solutions to school- and education-related problems. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of a parent training program designed to increase a school district’s capacity for public participation by parents and other citizens.

The program—known as Leadership St. Vrain—provided citizens knowledge about school district operations and management (know-how) and relationship-building opportunities with key decision makers (know-who). This article focuses on the experiences and participation of the citizens from a mixed-methods study that collected data using two original survey instruments, follow-up interviews, and archival documents. Of the five domains studied, this paper focuses on findings for the domains of knowledge, relationships, and action as well as the secondary ripple effect from participants to others who did not participate in the training.

In a recent issue of the Administrative Issues Journal, Dr. Michael Williams encourages readers to be ready to ‘seize the day’ when presented with unexpected opportunities and the accompanying “contexts-of-change” (Williams, 2012). “Contexts-of-change are potentials,” writes Williams, “...unique alignments between an opportunity and our knowledge and skills that, if properly used, can enable us to benefit from engaging the opportunity” (p. 3). Williams serves as the Dean of the MBA Program at Thomas Edison State College (New Jersey) and may have been directing his comments to aspiring entrepreneurs and business leaders, but the advice is equally valid for education. In particular, I think it valid for the legions of America’s public school administrators now managing a crucible of financial, political and social problems impacting public schools.

Rise of the Expert

Public participation is defined “as any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to make decisions,” (International Association of Public Participation, 2006, p. 2). Central to public participation is the idea that individuals or groups affected by a particular decision should be given an opportunity to be engaged in making that decision. However, when institutional leaders bypass the difficult work of inclusionary decision making, the outcomes can include inadequate or misinformed decisions, diminished stakeholder trust and buy-in, increased disengagement from public affairs, rejection of institutional policies and decisions, and refusal to provide advocacy, monetary support and volunteer time. Accordingly, administrators of public institutions are evaluating their decision making processes and exploring strategies to authentically and systematically engage stakeholders to better understand shared problems and the collective well-being (Mathews, 2006). This requires working through the complexities posed by individual interests, perceptions and positions to find workable solutions that garner stakeholder support (Yankelovich & Friedman, 2010).

Loss of Social Capital

Insulating schools from citizen involvement strained the formerly close bonds that existed between the citizens and their schools. Fewer parents attended school-related functions, joined committees, or sought leadership roles on Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) and school boards (Putnam, 2000). The experiences and perspectives parents had previously provided to complement the findings and recommendations of professional educators were significantly lessened. The lack of citizen involvement also resulted in greater distrust and less buy-in for the decisions made. According to McNeil (2002), “There has perhaps been no time in our history when links between public education and democracy have been as tenuous as they are right now” (p. 234). Some have argued that this distancing between institution and citizens has resulted in school districts losing valuable input, public support, and commitment for new policies and change initiatives. In the absence of collaborative problem solving, policymaking, and shared governance, administrators grow comfortable conducting business and implementing policies without working through complex or controversial problems with parents and other stakeholders.

The Case for Public Participation in Schools

In the twenty-first century, leaders of U.S. public institutions—town councils, police departments, and school districts—are expected to manage conflicts that emerge from the competing interests and values of citizens. Seemingly mundane issues such as school menus, bus schedules, school boundaries, and curriculum choices routinely evoke intense controversy between citizens and school staff members or central office administrators. When leaders facilitate opportunities for citizens to deliberate on shared school-related problems, citizens develop a greater understanding of the complexity of issues involved and strengthen their skills of deliberation and judgment (Yankelovich & Friedman, 2010). Unfortunately, officials frequently go the opposite direction when, empowered with expert knowledge, they develop solutions and then implement a “decide, announce and defend” (Yosie & Herbst, 1998, p. 24) strategy to achieve a preferred and predetermined outcome. Even when such an initiative is successfully implemented, increased public distrust resulting from an exclusive process can take years to reconcile.

Leadership St. Vrain

The study was based on a training program designed to increase the capacity of a public school district for public participation and stakeholder engagement. In the program, invitations were broadly disseminated inviting citizens to a series of meetings to gain information about school district operations and management (referred to as know-how), and relationship-building opportunities with key decision makers associated with the school district (referred to as know-who). The purpose of the study was to determine if the training increased participant knowledge, relationship, and action with or about school district and education-related issues, and whether the training had a secondary ripple effect on other individuals and groups in the school district and community.

The training, called Leadership St. Vrain (LSV) took place in the St. Vrain Valley School District (SVVSD), located in northern Colorado. SVVSD includes 53 schools with a growing enrollment nearing 30,000 students. Participants, mostly parents, attended 10 meetings over eight months during the course of the school year, with each meeting approximately 2.5 hours in length. The know-how components of LSV were based on presentations about all aspects of district operations, including school finance, state education funding, state and federal school laws and policies, state and district-level governance, school board policies, regulatory requirements, curriculum, and information about school operations and management. Each meeting included a know-who portion with opportunities for relationship building with SVVSD administrators and board members, as well as state elected and appointed officials, who were invited speakers.

Methodology

The mixed-methods study contained 3 phases of data collection: Phase 1 was comprised of quantitative surveys of two citizen populations from the LSV and PTO groups, Phase 2 was comprised of face-to-face interviews of LSV participants and PTO members, and Phase 3 was a review of archival materials documenting the presence and/or influence of activities related to LSV in the greater community.

Findings

The qualitative and quantitative findings indicated that a majority of the LSV participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the training significantly increased their knowledge of school district operations, improved their relationships with key influencers in the district, and increased their involvement in education- and district-related activities. Findings also indicated that the training had a “ripple effect” that extended beyond the trainees and impacted education- and district-related issues in the greater community.

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