

Positive Community Engagement in Public Meetings

School districts provide a wide variety of ways for constituents to share their values and priorities with educational decision-makers. These opportunities range from individual connections like calls, emails, and personal meetings, to settings like committees and parent groups, to more formal and/or public opportunities like surveys, open forums, and school board meetings.

Thinking in advance about how you will facilitate these interactions improves the odds that they will be positive and productive. The following tips and reminders are generally focused on public meetings, but many of the concepts apply to community engagement in all settings.

BEFORE THE MEETING

- **Review your board’s policy and procedure regarding meeting conduct, public attendance, and public comment:** For many boards, the relevant policy/procedure is “1400/1400P – Meeting conduct, Order of Business and Quorum,” but your board policy may have a different number or title. Ensure that your board has adopted (and follows) provisions for conducting a civil, orderly meeting.
- **What type of meeting are you facilitating?** Your regular board meeting might not be the most conducive format for the initial consideration of a controversial issue. Think about adding some informal educational sessions and listening to address initial concerns and demonstrate the board’s commitment to genuine community involvement.
- **Consider the agenda:** Does the order of meeting activities allow district leaders to share information and address anticipated questions preemptively, in advance of opportunities for public comment or Q&A? If not, consider revising.
- **Provide access to information:** Provide links to your meeting packet in advance so everyone has the opportunity to view and consider the same material the board has received. Consider having some printed copies of key documents available at the meeting. This supports clarity on the issue and avoids public records requests.
- **Offer alternatives for commenting:** Invite comments by email or mail and acknowledge their receipt and entry into the record. This allows for more public comment and includes those who are not comfortable with making comments at the meeting.
- **Revisit the room layout and seating arrangements:** Is the room layout and/or leaders’ typical seating habits fostering opportunities for dialogue or contributing to a feeling of “us vs. them?”
- **Check social media:** Actively monitor social channels in advance of your meeting for comments, activity or other details that could change your conversation or approach.
- **Greet Attendees:** Consider whether it is possible for board members to greet attendees as they enter. This creates a more welcoming atmosphere and humanizes the board.
- **Attend to safety, while being discrete:** Set aside time in advance to talk as a leadership team about safety concerns that could arise. Identify ways to address those concerns, such as a parking plan or

buddy system. Visible officer presence can act as a deterrent or it can escalate a situation; talk this through with local law enforcement leadership in advance so everyone has the same expectations.

DURING THE MEETING

- **Set the tone:** Words and body language matter; maintaining a calm and respectful demeanor is critical. Be mindful of both your active and resting facial expressions, especially in virtual meetings where the camera could be recording you any time.
- **Reaffirm the public comment process:** Make it a habit for the board president to provide a high-level review of the board's policies and procedures before this item on the agenda.
- **Remember who you serve:** As a school board member or administrator, you mostly work with the adults in your school system ... but you *serve* your community's students. The more tightly you maintain focus on the needs of your community's students, the harder it is to get pulled into unproductive disagreements about issues that are beyond your sphere of influence.
- **Consider all of your constituents:** One parent or patron, or even a vocal group, cannot reflect the sentiments of your whole district. Listen sincerely, consider their view honestly, and record any follow-up activities as appropriate. At the same time, remember there are others who are NOT in the room who have different needs, priorities, and opinions. You represent them, too.
- **Capture the follow-ups:** Ensure at least one staff member is tracking requests for additional information or other action items. Consider making this list visible so they have confidence that they are being heard and their concerns will be addressed.
- **Dealing with serious disruptions:** Boards have authority to ask security or law enforcement to remove anyone causing a disruption that renders orderly conduct of the meeting unfeasible. Boards may also clear the entire room and readmit only those who were not disruptive. Boards also have authority to adjourn the meeting and reconvene at another location selected by majority vote of the board. Currently, all open public meetings can be held in an exclusively virtual format, including a reconvened meeting. In such a reconvened meeting, final action may occur only on matters appearing on the agenda.

AFTER THE MEETING

- **Revisit action items:** Did you capture all of the tasks you need to follow up on?
- **Close the loop:** Do what you say you will do. Follow through on requests for more information.