



## RESEARCH PRIORITY BRIEF

# BEST PRACTICES FOR DISTRICT COMMUNICATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS

## Introduction

As educational leaders, district and school administrators must make a variety of decisions on a wide spectrum of topics that vary from routine decisions to those that substantially impact students, staff, and the community. To maximize the effectiveness of decision-making, educational leaders should involve students, families, staff, and community members in the decision-making process—whenever possible—while being transparent about the rationale and process behind any decision. Research indicates that such stakeholder involvement helps them “understand [a] decision better and be more committed to making it work.”<sup>1</sup> To support districts in increasing transparency in communication and decision-making, Hanover synthesizes information from secondary literature in the following brief.

## Key Findings

- **Stakeholder trust increases when district leaders establish committees to assist with decision-making.** Involving stakeholders in the process helps to gather additional input and gain different perspectives on issues. District leaders should involve participants who have a stake in the decision, have expertise to contribute to the decision, and can be trusted to make decisions in the best interest of the school and district. Stakeholders typically include teachers, school board members, district office staff, principals, parents, and business community leaders.
- **Education leaders need to provide clear and concise rationale to stakeholders for all decisions, including an explanation of how stakeholder feedback impacted decision-making.**

## Involving Stakeholders in Decision-Making Processes

### Role of Leaders in Decision-Making

District and school leaders must constantly make decisions—both large and small—on a number of areas including budgeting, personnel, curriculum

and instruction, student discipline, facilities, and operations.<sup>2</sup> Research shows that effective decision-making in these areas is essential to effective programming and can have significant impacts on student outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, leaders must make strategic choices about how to make change within a local context. While superintendents and principals are the main decision-makers and approval for final decisions that affect the district and schools must go through them, decision-making power may be delegated to other parties.<sup>4,5</sup> In fact, the National Education Alliance recommends that administrators avoid unilateral decisions and communicate openly to bolster stakeholder buy-in and minimize potential conflicts.<sup>6</sup>

### Rationale for Involving Stakeholders in Decision-Making

**Schools and districts should provide stakeholders ample opportunities to be involved in the decision-making process.** Psychological and social research has shown that community engagement and participation in decision-making is necessary for optimal functioning of local school districts.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, research shows that stakeholders are more likely to actively and fully participate in the support of the school districts goals and efforts if they perceive that their input into the decision-making process that affect their lives it being taken into consideration.<sup>8</sup>

**By engaging in their communities, district leaders educate stakeholders in the process, build stronger relationships with those involved, and find different perspectives and possible solutions to problems.<sup>9</sup>** Once stakeholders become involved in an issue of importance, members develop a shared understanding through continued discussion and shared understanding of the issue.<sup>10</sup>

As a foundation of effective collaborative decision-making and communication with stakeholders, district and school leaders should “build a culture of engagement, transparency, and trust that is... sustainable and scalable across many schools.”<sup>11</sup> Essentially, district and school leaders should invest time and resources engaging students, teachers,

parents, and community members to establish rapport, trust, and credibility. Such actions create buy-in for stakeholders by enabling them to access district and school leaders regarding decisions. Throughout this initial relationship-building and during subsequent decision-making, **district and school leaders should communicate the importance of stakeholder input while clarifying that they will be the final decision-makers.**<sup>12</sup>

Establishing these foundations at the beginning of the decision-making process and maintaining them throughout can also potentially save time in the long-term. If decisions are made without stakeholder input, it may lead to more criticism, commentary, and challenges from outside stakeholders, which can cause miscommunication and a breakdown of trust. Conversely, open communication with and engagement of stakeholders can improve results, reduce resistance to decisions, and increase stakeholder resilience when challenges arise related to a decision.<sup>13</sup>

According to the National Education Association, “An additional benefit of community engagement is a better-informed constituency. By participating in the process, stakeholders gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing the district, as well as other issues.”<sup>14</sup>

## Strategies to Effectively Involve Stakeholders in Decision-Making

**District and school leaders aiming to engage stakeholders in decision-making should strive for meaningful engagement during the planning and prioritization process and regarding the final decision.** Stakeholder engagement can challenge education leaders, requiring deployment of multiple strategies—such as those listed below—to ensure that all relevant voices are heard.<sup>15</sup>

- ✓ Record informal feedback from everyday encounters with students, families, staff, and community members.
- ✓ Conduct online, telephone, or in-person surveys, vetted by stakeholders, to whole stakeholder groups or a representative sample.
- ✓ Conduct focus groups, possibly facilitated or monitored by a third party, to elicit continued feedback on a decision.
- ✓ Regularly update publicly available information, including timelines, to keep stakeholders abreast of planning and implementation.

- ✓ Communicate the outcome of strategies with stakeholders, using data and other resources.
- ✓ Regularly inform collaborators and supervising leadership of feedback.

Source: New Jersey Department of Education<sup>16</sup>

What kind of decision needs to be made determines what strategies need to be used to effectively involve relevant stakeholders. Strategies to build a collaborative culture around decision-making include:<sup>17</sup>

-  Creating a requirement that school and district leaders solicit and incorporate teachers’ professional expertise and parent, student, and community input into all decisions;
-  Specifying required timelines, resources, and accountability structures for gathering meaningful community input;
-  Offering district and school leaders training on best engagement practices;
-  Developing a representative oversight body to solicit teachers’ professional judgments and the community’s ideas, concerns, shared values, and vision for the district; and
-  Using surveys and multiple, accessible meetings to gather family and community input.

Source: NEA Policy Brief<sup>18</sup>

As a model for involving relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process, **Figure A** at the end of this research brief provides a decision-making matrix developed and used by Aurora Public Schools in Colorado. During the 2013-2014 school year, Aurora Public School (APS) in Colorado received concerns from stakeholders about how district leaders make and communicate decisions to staff members and the community, as well as how the district planned to be transparent about their work. In response to these concerns, APS developed a decision-making matrix and communication process flowchart to illustrate to stakeholders the district’s decision-making process. Notably, each phase of the process includes communication with relevant stakeholders.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that APS communicates all of decisions, including ones that are implemented or rejected.

## Factors for Determining Stakeholder Involvement

District and school leaders should consider a number of factors in determining who to involve in a decision and what their level of involvement will be. Importantly, **district and school leaders should involve participants who have a stake in the decision, have expertise to contribute to the decision, and can be trusted to make decisions in the best interest of the district or school.**<sup>20</sup> Specifically, The following figure explores some of these factors, including: time, interest, expertise, importance, and need for buy-in.

FACTOR	RATIONALE FOR CONSIDERATION
 <p>Time</p>	Urgency may require the leader to make their own decision without consultation. Collaborative decisions require more time than a decision made alone, so if important decisions are at stake, the leader must schedule more time for stakeholder involvement.
 <p>Interest</p>	On certain topics, stakeholders may be apathetic. In these cases, leaders would not benefit from soliciting participation from stakeholders. At higher levels of interest, more participation or collaboration is appropriate. Ultimately, leaders must generate interest in decision-making.
 <p>Expertise</p>	Staff with high levels of expertise require participation or collaboration to arrive at successful decisions. The leader who desires collaboration must raise levels of expertise to successfully involve subordinates.
 <p>Importance</p>	Some decisions are much more important and carry significant consequences. For such decisions, collaboration is the best model. If a decision is relatively unimportant, then the leader should make it.
 <p>Need for Buy-in</p>	Many decisions require staff support for successful implementation and results. A collaborative model often increases buy-in and support.

Source: Education World<sup>21</sup>

After determining an appropriate level of stakeholder involvement and a contingency of stakeholders to seek input from, **district and school**

**leadership should form collaborative decision-making committees to help make key decisions that affect their organization while also signaling to constituents that a given leader is not acting unilaterally.**<sup>22</sup> By engaging their communities in decision-making via committees, district and school leaders build stronger relationships with stakeholders and find different perspectives and possible solutions to problems.<sup>23</sup> In forming such committees, leaders should consider the specific parameters of the decision the committee will help make and the ideal functionality of the committee.<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, the leader should ensure that all committees and task forces possess the following attributes:



Source: ASCD<sup>25</sup>

## Best Practices for Teacher Participation in Decision-Making

District leaders should include teachers in decisions impact students, as teachers are largely responsible for implementing the decision.<sup>26</sup> Research finds that teacher participation in decision-making often leads to an increase in productivity.<sup>27</sup>

Productivity increases are not the only benefit of having teachers involved in decision-making. According to The National Network of Teachers of the Year, "Lack of teacher involvement and input in decision-making tend to reflect a lack of trust in teachers' perspectives, experiences and expertise. When the reverse is the norm, however, teachers are more likely to experience positive morale and motivation, a heightened sense of efficacy, and higher levels of enthusiasm and trust."<sup>28</sup> The bullet points below highlight important considerations for involving teachers in decision-making.

- The opportunity to share in formulating policies is an important factor in the morale of teachers and their enthusiasm for the school.
- Participation in decision making is positively related to the individual teacher's satisfaction with the profession of teaching.
- Teachers prefer principals who involve them in decision making.
- Top-down initiatives often fail because they are not accepted by those who need to implement changes.
- Teachers neither expect nor want to be involved in every decision; in fact, too much involvement can be as detrimental as too little.
- The roles and functions of both teachers and administrators in decision-making need to be varied according to the nature of the problem.

Source: Hoy and Miskel<sup>29</sup>

## Best Practices for Parent Participation in Decision-Making

**Districts can involve families in decision-making by providing opportunities for family members to serve on various school leadership committees**, such as school improvement planning teams, budgetary committees, policy council, PTA advisory, and curriculum support committees.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that community meetings need to be accessible and have flexible schedules (i.e., meetings held at various times and locations, providing free childcare) to give families ample opportunities to attend.

**Additionally, schools should aim to have parent representation on committees that reflects the composition of the student body.** To accomplish this, schools should specifically reach out to parents who are unrepresented on committees. In their Family Engagement Framework, the California Department of Education (CDE) recommends that schools "reach out to and support parents who are economically disadvantaged, have limited English, are migrants, or have children with disabilities to serve on committees."<sup>31</sup>

According to research, most families and community members do not have the proper information or training to contribute in school decisions effectively.<sup>32</sup> The CDE recommends that schools train parents so they are given the proper skills to adequately serve on advisory committees or participate in curricular and budgetary decision-making.<sup>33</sup> Training for parents and community members is another important element in building

trust and effectiveness.<sup>34</sup> Providing training on curricular and budgetary decision-making for parents and coordinators will help educate those interested in contributing to decisions.<sup>35</sup>

The CDE also advocates for schools to create and support parent centers at school sites.<sup>36</sup> These centers help to provide parents or community members with additional resources for information and services to help attend school functions. Centers at school sites provide parents child care while at training sessions or school or district meetings.

## Increasing Transparency in Communication with Stakeholders

**Both the decision-making process and transparency in decision-making require effective communication between stakeholders and school and district leaders.** Irrespective of district or school size, developing a communications plan or revisiting an existing plan is essential, especially if a district or school is perceived as not communicating well with community, staff, or parents. Districts need to provide clear and concise rationale to stakeholders for all decisions.<sup>37</sup> Providing stakeholders and community members with justification on what decisions are or are not made helps to establish support and credibility.<sup>38</sup>

Districts should distinguish communication methods based on a certain audience. The figure below lists several strategies to communicate with stakeholders.

 All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Email</li> <li>▪ Websites</li> <li>▪ Social Media</li> <li>▪ Ads</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ News media</li> <li>▪ Fact sheets</li> <li>▪ Meetings</li> <li>▪ Events</li> </ul>
 Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Newsletter</li> <li>▪ Staff bulletin</li> <li>▪ Automated messages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trainings</li> <li>▪ Coaches</li> <li>▪ Meetings</li> </ul>
 Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Parent portal</li> <li>▪ Letters</li> <li>▪ Automated messages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Family liaison</li> <li>▪ Newsletter</li> <li>▪ School events</li> </ul>
 Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Newsletters</li> <li>▪ Community centers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Volunteers</li> <li>▪ Partnerships</li> </ul>

Source: Aurora Public Schools<sup>39</sup>

## Using Technology to Increase Transparency

District and school leaders can also use technology to strengthen transparency and establish a culture of openness.<sup>40</sup> In particular, district and school websites serve as an important outlet to share information to parents and community members. A successful website is easy to use, up-to-date, easily accessible on mobile devices, and has ample ways for stakeholders to provide feedback.<sup>41</sup>

The chart below details some effective ways to use online platforms to increase transparency and properly communicate information to stakeholders.

<b>Budgets</b>	<i>Put any budget over which the district controls in an online spreadsheet available for anyone to read - teachers, administrators, parents, and the community.</i>
<b>Calendars</b>	<i>Make calendars - district leader calendars, school calendars, events calendars, and facility calendars - available online.</i>
<b>Data</b>	<i>Frequently share and update data regarding student test scores, retention rates, and other metrics that indicate progress.</i>
<b>Goals and Initiatives</b>	<i>This includes district and school strategic plans, annual improvement plans, and metrics of accomplishment, with a means for stakeholders to comment on them.</i>
<b>Curriculum</b>	<i>Putting academic standards, curricular objectives, and major units with assessments online enables families to actively support their children's success.</i>
<b>Daily Information</b>	<i>Supply lists, lunch menus, activity schedules, and other basic information that families must see.</i>
<b>Leadership Opinions and Values</b>	<i>Make it clear where the district stands on major education issues. Consistency and openness helps further build trust. Stakeholders may agree or disagree but will be on the same page.</i>

## Best Practices for Communicating with Teachers and School Staff

Clear communication with teachers and staff about district decisions can help build and strengthen internal school relationships.<sup>42</sup> Notably, the type of decision and how it affects teachers and staff will have an impact on the appropriate type of communication method. The figure below highlights various channels in which school and district leaders can communicate with teachers and school staff.

When communicating decisions to teachers and school staff via any of these platforms, **school and district leaders should enable teachers and other staff to provide input on decisions that affect them.**<sup>43</sup>

There are many ways in which districts can gather feedback (e.g., surveys, focus groups), and leaders should always ensure a process or instrument is in place to collect staff feedback.<sup>44</sup>

MASS COMMUNICATION	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Consistency</li> <li>✓ Frequency</li> <li>✓ Allows for details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of personal touch</li> </ul>
STAFF MEETINGS	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Slightly more personal</li> <li>✓ Best used to convey basic information</li> <li>✓ Allows for discussion and feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of frequency</li> <li>▪ Not everyone may attend</li> <li>▪ Not effective for sharing details</li> </ul>
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SESSIONS	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Consistency</li> <li>✓ Opportunities for feedback</li> <li>✓ Effective when focusing attention on one or two topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of frequency</li> <li>▪ Not everyone may attend</li> <li>▪ Less effective in covering many topics at once</li> </ul>
ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS WITH TEACHERS	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Personal</li> <li>✓ Provides school leaders insight into teacher concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of frequency</li> <li>▪ Inconsistency</li> </ul>

Source: Louisiana Department of Education<sup>45</sup>

## Best Practices for Communication Between Teachers and Parents

Strong communication between teachers and parents is critical to promoting engagement. Creating two-way communication helps create a partnership between the family and the school. However, lackluster communication can inhibit family engagement and lead parents to perceive a district or school as less family-friendly.<sup>46</sup>

There are several barriers that can impede communication between teachers and parents. Economic and time constraints may be primary obstacles for parent engagement with schools. To

address this, meeting times should be somewhat flexible to accommodate working parents, including those working shifts and those who commute.<sup>47</sup> Cultural differences or language barriers can hinder effective communication as well. To address this, school leaders should proactively provide teachers with information to aid their understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity reflected in the families of their students.<sup>48</sup>

Once standards for communication are established, school staff should continue to ask parents for feedback for how communication is working and how it can be improved.<sup>52</sup>

At the start of each school year, school leaders should survey families to determine preferred methods of communication. The Ohio Department of Education demonstrates that it is imperative for districts and schools to “have a variety of communication strategies that reflect the types of communication preferred in their community.”<sup>49</sup>

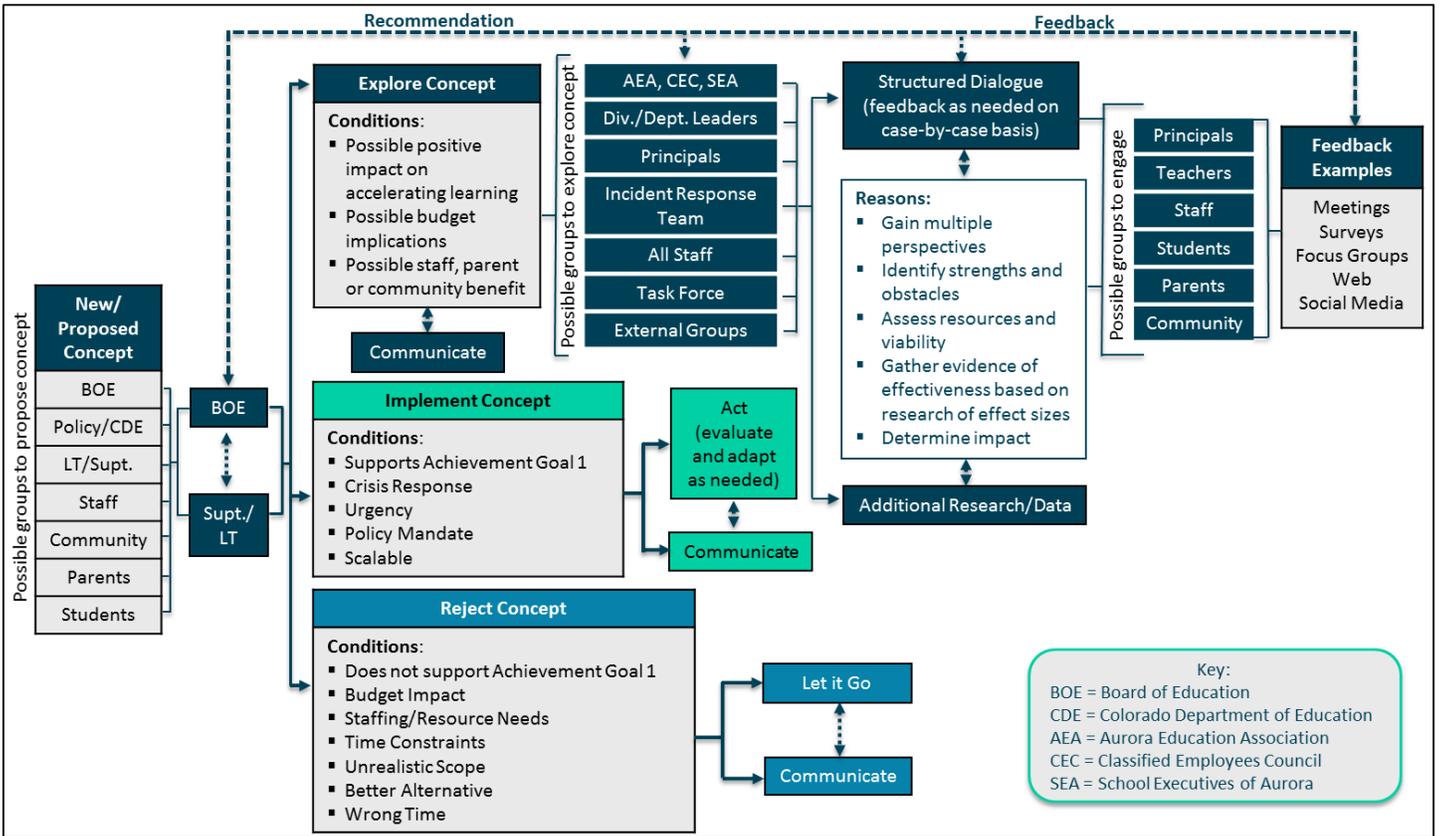
The figure below highlights some methods for communicating with families.<sup>50</sup>

- |                 |                         |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| ▪ Texting       | ▪ Print                 |
| ▪ Written notes | ▪ Face-to-face meetings |
| ▪ Web sites     | ▪ Television            |
| ▪ Social media  | ▪ Blogs                 |
| ▪ Phone calls   | ▪ E-mail                |

Source: Ohio Department of Education<sup>51</sup>



**Figure A: Decision-Making Matrix for Aurora Public Schools (CO)**



Source: Aurora Public Schools (CO)<sup>53</sup>

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## Endnotes

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<sup>7</sup> Bartz, D.E. "Community Engagement: A Key Ingredient for Public Schools Gaining Stakeholders' Input and Support." *National Forum of Educational Administration & Supervision Journal*, 2018. <http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Bartz,%20David%20E%20Community%20Engagement%20NFEASJ%20V36%20N%204%202018.pdf>

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<sup>9</sup> Clark, B. "Engage Your Stakeholders When Important Budget Decisions Must Be Made." National School Public Relations Association. [https://www.nspr.org/e\\_network/2012-11\\_goldstandard](https://www.nspr.org/e_network/2012-11_goldstandard)

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- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>16</sup> Figure text quoted verbatim, with minor adaptations, from: Ibid., p. 22.
- <sup>17</sup> Bulleted text quoted verbatim, with minor adaptations, from: "Planning for School Restructuring: Keeping Stakeholders in the Process," Op. cit., p. 2.
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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> "Communicating with Families." Ohio Department of Education. <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Other-Resources/Family-and-Community-Engagement/Framework-for-Building-Partnerships-Among-Schools/Communicating-with-Families.pdf.aspx>

<sup>50</sup> "Family Engagement Framework: A Tool for California School Districts," Op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> "Communicating with Families," Op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> "How Strong Communication Contributes to Student and School Success: Parent and Family Involvement," Op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> Figure taken directly, with minor adaptations, from: "Decision-Making Process." Aurora Public Schools, February 6, 2014. <https://superintendent.aurorak12.org/leadership-team/decision-making-process/>