



Community Engagement 2.0

The results were in, and the voters' response to the proposal was heard loud and clear. The score was 71 percent to 29 percent. The answer was a resounding NO!

I thought it was a great plan: Public school facilities built around a 21st-century vision of teaching and learning. Instructional programming that would create individualized opportunities for students to prepare them more readily for life after high school. It was a school district plan based on feedback from local business and industry, focus groups, community surveys and multiple forums.

The proposal was right for the district's nearly 9,000 students. It was also right for the long-term workforce and economic development of the community. It made perfect sense. So what went wrong in this suburban Midwest community?

Courtship First

The fact is school districts across the country are finding it more and more challenging to gain and maintain public trust and support. Even when it seems like a "no-brainer," patron endorsement of schools can be

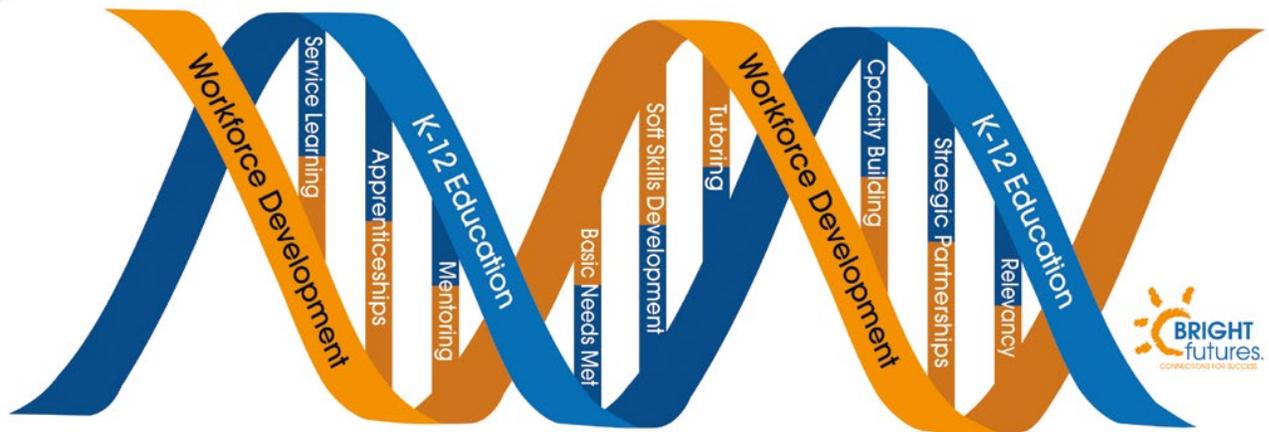
hard to muster in this era of limited resources, economic instability and a lesser role for government.

Couple this reality with an ever-changing political landscape and a 24/7 news cycle dominated by stories about schools that are far more negative than positive, and the relationship, or marriage if you will, between schools and communities is perpetually at risk. Consequently, traditional methods of engagement are becoming less effective. Updating school district strategies to reflect a 21st-century approach to community relationship-building is a necessity. It's time to download and install Community Engagement 2.0.

A common mistake in school/community engagement occurs when a district makes a "big ask" of the community before a deep and meaningful relationship is established. To put this into context, imagine the first time you met your significant other. What would happen if, rather than striking up a conversation or making the invitation to go to dinner and a movie, you instead went straight to the end game and popped the big question: "Will you marry me?"

A three-part scaffold for local schools to capture the public's trust and build on it for student benefits

BY C.J. HUFF



To engineer the scaffolding to support effective engagement strategies means school leaders must be deliberate in efforts to build sustainable and meaningful long-term school/community partnerships. These relationships must be built to transcend the myriad distractions that can, and often do, derail intended results. Not unlike the courtship-to-marriage continuum, the development of school/community partnerships in a 2.0 environment has to be intentional and ongoing.

Common Disconnect

So where do you start? The answer to this simple question is multifaceted. However, to understand where engagement strategies must begin, let's first take a step back and look at an often-overlooked point of disconnect between schools and communities.

Leaders nationwide are engaged in two sets of conversations. Business and community leaders point to the education system's failure to develop the "soft" and basic skills needed by graduates to meet employability requirements. Consequently, employers are committing additional workplace resources to fill the skills gap through training. Meanwhile, education leaders point to poverty-driven factors that plague communities and adversely affect the lives of the children and their readiness for learning.

A scarcity of school resources to meet the growing physical, social and emotional needs of our students

while meeting the high expectations of business and industry is our new reality. Consequently, frustrations on the part of well-intentioned school leaders run high. The irony is both the community and schools want *exactly the same thing* — a life-ready graduate who is prepared to become a great employee, excellent leader, engaged citizen and someone capable of supporting himself or herself plus a family.

Sadly, in spite of having a common desirable outcome, the blame game continues. Public education runs on one track, while community workforce development efforts run

on a separate track — both trying to accomplish the same thing in a dysfunctional way. As a result, the potential for a beautiful marriage between the school and community seldom comes to fruition.

Entry Points

Fortunately, it does not have to be that way. The challenge to building a collaborative relationship between public schools and their communities lies in the identification of entry points for engagement — entry points where the relationship can begin to develop and ultimately achieve that common desirable outcome.



Students' service learning in Carl Junction, Mo., includes the sorting and delivery of donated food products to needy families in the community.

PHOTO BY AARON KAFTON



Over the last six years, I have worked with more than 50 communities attempting to upgrade systems of community engagement through a framework developed by the national not-for-profit organization Bright Futures USA (*BrightFuturesUSA.org*). Three primary components that comprise the framework serve as logical entry points to bring together the collective resources of the business community, faith-based organizations, human service agencies and parents to support the education of children:

- ▶ Developing systems of support to meet any child’s basic need within 24 hours;
- ▶ Building the resource, problem solving and leadership capacity of the community to overcome the challenges facing our youth; and
- ▶ Providing relevant, hands-on, curriculum-based service learning experiences to embed the ideal of service above self in our next generation of citizens.

From Fairbanks, Alaska, to Pea Ridge Ark., and from Mexico, Mo., to Winchester, Va., I have learned an invaluable lesson that should make every school leader eager to raise community engagement take notice. That lesson is simply this: Good people exist in every community. And good people are compelled to act when they fully understand the problems faced by our youth, know where to go to get resources and realize where the opportunities for partnership exist. The primary responsibility of school leaders is to intentionally establish a system of engagement that facilitates community understanding and grassroots action.

Deeper Conversations

An effective entry point for the self-discovery process to begin can be found in conducting conversations about the needs of our kids and aligning community resources to meet those needs. Even highly conservative



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communities that tend to see social services as an entitlement to the poor quickly rally around children when they become aware of a problem. In Carl Junction, Mo., when the community became aware of a child whose toes had grown through the end of his wornout shoes, citizens rallied and got the young man new shoes. More importantly, the community began a broader conversation about children with this type of need and established a closet at the school stocked with shoes. Why? Because the community said, “That should never happen here. Not in our backyard!”

Once engaged, these conversations spur resource alignment of existing human service agencies, faith-based organizations, and business, as well as individuals in the community with something in their attic or basement that might be helpful to kids.

This is the front end of the relationship, or courtship if you will — communities coming together to wrap their arms around all of our children. It’s a beautiful thing, but it’s just the start of Community Engagement 2.0.

As the community becomes

engaged in supporting children at a basic level, deeper conversations begin to happen. In time, a natural “marriage” occurs. It may take a few years to get there, but in the communities we work with, these deeper conversations result in enhanced mentorships, internships and apprenticeship programs, job shadowing, student-led service learning projects, fully engaged business partners that bring new resources to classrooms and new partnerships for career and technical education programs. Relevancy is brought to the classroom and students get much more exposure to local job opportunities in the community they and their teachers may not have known existed.

Value is added to the mission of human service agencies and new resources become immediately available. Business and industry partners take ownership in the schools and value them as a partner in workforce development efforts. And the faith community finds ways to get involved in appropriate and meaningful ways in the life of the schools. A long-term relationship grounded in mutual respect, trust and understanding.

Grassroots Advocacy

In this era of limited resources, increased accountability and expected transparency, education leaders at the local level should be taking intentional steps to grow a solid base of grassroots public school advocates and raise a generation of youth that reflect what we all are striving to achieve. Community Engagement 2.0 allows our communities to participate in the life of our schools in a meaningful and relevant way. It gives others an opportunity to learn about our good work, to tell the story of public education and, most importantly, create opportunities for kids that never would have existed otherwise. ■

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