

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Recommendations from the 2009 Study Group

The Process

A study group consisting of P-12 educators (5), teacher educators/administrator educators (6), educational partnership/program directors (2), and a community/ educational consultant (1) came together for approximately six hours across three days (October 15-17) during the annual meeting of the NNER. Each day, 1-3 visitors joined us; their contributions also informed our work. We discussed common readings about and experiences with community engagement and believed that we could work toward consensus regarding action steps that we could recommend to the NNER's governing board and to each of the NNER settings. Each day we reviewed and approved notes of the previous day's meeting discussions and we agreed to review draft versions of this report prior to submitting the final report as a consensus document.

The Study Group's Common Understandings

We believe that community members' (broadly defined) participation in meaningful engagement with their local schools is critical to successful renewal of schools and educator preparation. We also believe that school and university educators must become members of the community in which they work. It isn't nor should it be only educators who convene groups; educators should also participate as community members with groups where educators are a stakeholder group. In order for all of our nation's youths to succeed in their p-12 schooling, community, school, and university educators must seek understanding of and solutions to socially embedded, complex issues/problems. No single group is able to solve these problems. Instead, we must bring together very diverse groups of stakeholders, including those with positional and decision-making power and those whose voices are often silent, absent, or silenced. We must create the conditions whereby school, university (both education and arts and sciences) and community members advocate for each other's needs and come together to create solutions that take into account multiple perspectives and experiences as well as systemic issues. Inclusive processes that are data rich and diverse will help us achieve more sustainable solutions.

We believe that community engagement is a very complex concept. We believe that in order for these four groups (P-12 educators, university teacher educators, university arts and sciences educators, community members broadly defined) to contribute equitably to complex educational discussions, we need to ensure a set of conditions:

1. The issue or problem to be addressed must be authentic and sufficiently complex.
2. Participants can develop the skills, networks, and expertise needed to successfully solve larger problems by first creating solutions to smaller problems.
3. A culture of engagement and trust must be developed, nurtured, and valued. This will take time and trustworthy action.
4. Process participation must be non-hierarchical. All contributors are equally valued; positional power is checked at the door. Power positions are relied on for action steps.
5. Both shared purpose and enlightened self-interest must be present for all. Everyone must gain for sustainable solutions to be achieved.
6. Whenever possible, neutral process facilitators must lead the work in neutral settings/ locations; ground rules must be established. Settings will benefit from a cadre of trained facilitators who reflect the four stakeholder groups.
7. Content expertise and data-driven processes must be employed.

Challenges

We also believe that community engagement brings with it an ever-present set of challenges. These challenges must be understood, acknowledged and addressed if true progress is to be achieved. A longer list of challenges is found in Appendix A. Below we present a ranked list of what we believe to be four of the most critical challenges to be considered.

1. **Achieving Common Understandings.** It takes a great deal of time and common work to develop understandings of others' circumstances, values, and perspectives. Often times we come from very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In order to actively value everyone, numerous issues must be considered. Culturally appropriate practices must be developed and used. Professional jargon must be avoided. Everyone needs to learn how to listen carefully as needs can and will change over time.
2. **Commonly Understood Processes/Strategies.** As groups begin their work together, they must set norms and ground rules for their own and the group's actions. How will the group interact? How will they work through the inevitable conflict situations? What happens when some members choose to leave? What happens when individuals create or perpetuate conflict? The more the processes and strategies are discussed in advance and the skills taught explicitly, the less they will be needed.
3. **Problem Identification.** The problem or issue to be addressed must be sufficiently complex as to require a diverse group of stakeholders at the table. It also must be appropriate for the skills and experiences of the group. Time should be taken to ensure that everyone agrees with and understands the problem and then, together, creates a common goal or goals.
4. **Shared Commitment.** Different stakeholders will necessarily have different levels of commitment to school and community renewal. It is critical that the issues that drive this work pose problems or difficulties for all and that all gain when solutions are achieved.

Recommended Action Steps

The study group agreed to five action steps that we believe should be considered if community engagement is to become a higher priority within the NNER. Those action steps follow:

1. The governing board formally adopts /declares a new vision for the Agenda for Education in a Democracy that includes a bold commitment to the community's engagement in school and educator preparation renewal
2. The governing board asks an ad hoc committee to create a rubric that could help settings assess their community engagement efforts.
3. Each setting assesses their current skills, efforts, and status with regard to community engagement and educational renewal.
4. A setting may create its own assessment of engagement, with the understanding that all settings are working toward meaningful partnerships with all stakeholder groups.
5. Each setting puts forth a community engagement action plan for their setting that is included in their NNER annual report.

Note: The steps above are modeled after the process used to increase commitment to and progress toward equity within the NNER settings.

Exemplars

The Study Group recognizes a primary exemplar that may assist settings in community engagement. The final report of the Kellogg-funded initiative Developing Networks (DN) of Responsibility for America's Youths, provides excellent rationale and very diverse models for what this work can look like and entail. We also applaud a solution to community needs that arose from the Illinois setting's DN participation.

Resources/References

The Study Group presents these resources and potentially helpful to settings:

1. Rationale for Community Engagement authored by Cori Mantle-Bromley (NNER Blogspot)
2. Other references located on the NNER Blogspot
3. David Chrislip's books
4. Notes from this week's expert study panel sessions (Thursday, Friday, and Saturday)
5. P-16 Councils – operating within most states
6. Building the Wyoming (your state) you want (funded state initiative).

The Study Group also believes that local resources and initiatives are likely available in each setting and encourage setting personnel to seek these out.

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