As California’s schools navigate the LCFF and LCAPs, parents, families and other stakeholders need to have meaningful engagement in schools to truly impact student performance.

**Stakeholder input** meetings. We’ve all participated in them, and the drill is familiar. Initial introductions. A PowerPoint or Prezi. Speakers and possible note-taking. At some point, we may even be encouraged to share thoughts and opinions.

Leaving the meeting, we typically ask ourselves some questions: What value will our input be given? How will it be used? Is the school or organization’s course of action already predetermined? Is the meeting a simple ruse, intended to persuade the participants it is the right course of action? Or is the school or organization authentically looking for input?

As California’s schools navigate this new era of accountability, the mandate for stakeholder engagement is clear. Input is a requirement for compliance with the state’s guidelines for the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), not to mention the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

Yet we are confronted with another important finding: The research on student achievement shows that parents, families and other stakeholders need to have meaningful engagement in schools in order to truly impact students’ performance.

Accordingly, let’s look at how school leaders can elicit meaningful stakeholder engagement.

First, we need to highlight the variance in levels of “public engagement” we have now. A recent study of several school districts conducted by the Kettering Foundation found that, to the leaders of those districts, “Public engagement most commonly meant making an effort to explain their initiatives to distinct groups in the community in order to win support for things leadership already decided needed to be done.”

By Holly Edds
The foundation found that techniques were also used “to gauge community concerns and serve as early indications of resistance to potential initiatives,” and that “public engagement created venues to absorb the objections of squeaky wheels – persistent advocates who needed to be heard. Very few looked to non-professionals for useful advice about improving schools and enhancing children’s learning. Nor did they see others in their districts as collaborators in the education of youth. Leaders longed for more community ‘support,’ but they mainly regarded people outside the schools as constituencies they needed to manage, coax or reassure.”

While the district leaders participating in the study defined public engagement as a critical part of their work, the study found the techniques and conventional forms of communication they were using actually backfired, ultimately resulting in an erosion in trust when expectations were unmet.

“Ironically, public engagement – the very strategy intended to reconnect districts to their constituents and ameliorate divisions among stakeholders – ended up making relationships worse,” the study found.

The task of engaging stakeholders in a meaningful way (with little or no experience in doing so) continues to be daunting, especially given the complexities of the budget process and the new requirements of the state’s funding system.

To further complicate the engagement process, research conducted on early implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula also found that, “Parents naturally viewed district priorities through the lens of their child’s best interests, advocacy groups advocated for their constituencies, and the majority of citizens had little or no experience with the kind of direct local democracy envisioned by the LCFF.”

What Is Engagement?

Described as a cycle, stakeholder engagement moves through four phases:

• Planning: determining what decisions will be affected; who the participants are; establishing the background; and selecting the right questions to ask.

• Participation: gathering of input and ideas; learning from each other; and setting priorities.

• Analysis: consolidating all the input in order to establish a relevant course of action.

• Sharing: encapsulating and distributing results to relevant, interested parties.

Stakeholder engagement is not a new concept. Businesses have been striving for successful engagement to thrive and continue to grow. Businesses realize when they listen to stakeholders and make them part of the process, they will ensure organizational success.

Schools and districts must do the same in order to realize their true potential. Ideally, stakeholder engagement is about cultivating and maintaining a meaningful relationship, characterized by two-way dialogue and high levels of trust and interdependence.

Building Trust

Stephen Covey presents trust as a “tax” or a “dividend,” depending on the level of trust in an organization. When trust among stakeholders in an organization is low, a hidden “tax” is placed on every communication, decision, interaction and strategy that slows down progress and increases the need for resources (i.e., time, personnel, etc.).

On the contrary, when trust among stakeholders is high, it can be a “dividend” or multiplier, enabling high levels of communication, interactions and decisions. Thus, the organization is able to run much more efficiently and in one direction.

Transparency is essential to building trust with stakeholders in order to engage them in a meaningful way. They must understand not only the budget and programs in place, but also the data surrounding what is working and what is not.

Tell Your Story

As we shift from a compliance-based model of accountability to a performance-based one, it is important that others know your district or school’s narrative. What are you about? What is important to you? What is working in your organization and what is not?

What we do no longer is about a list of tasks to complete and compliance demonstration, it is about continued growth. Growth is about process and performance. Communicating to stakeholders is critical. How can they support you and your initiatives if they don’t understand them and what you are hoping to achieve?

Telling your story should involve sharing that information in all pertinent venues: print and email newsletters, website postings and social media. Don’t be hesitant to develop talking points for your administrators and school board members in preparation for those critical conversations with parents and the community.

Plan for Authenticity

The definition of “authentic” is “of undis-
to understand and agree on a common set of values or beliefs will result in a stronger outcome. For example, my own school district has established “all students can learn at high levels” and “meeting the needs of the whole child” as core values.

**Know Your Audience**

Often we schedule meetings at times when parents may not be able to attend. For example, if you have a large population of children of farmworkers, scheduling a meeting in the afternoon or during the day when they are working is not feasible.

If the culture of your community is to serve food during the meeting, be sure to plan for that. Learning more about the needs of your stakeholders is paramount to building trust with them. Meet them where they are. Small gestures can lead to big benefits.

Meantime, keep in mind that we live in the information age — communication is everywhere, and your school or district is a topic of conversation. Share the positive news of what is happening and use the tools of the 21st century to do so. Advances in technology and online access have yielded new, more effective and more efficient ways of connecting with stakeholders:

- Use social media to engage stakeholders and share your story. A school or district Facebook page can be a steady source of information to group members. Twitter can communicate headlines and short bursts of information.
- Infographics are another way to communicate your story. Several vendors in the state specialize in presenting school and district documents such as the LCAP in easy-to-understand visuals and graphics.
- An updated web presence is essential. Be sure your website is up to date and is accessible from mobile devices such as cellphones and tablets. If you have stakeholders’ attention long enough for them to actually go to your website, you want to keep them as long as possible.
- School and district newsletters need to be published in a format — print or email — that is favored by stakeholders. Those who produce an email newsletter should put it in a format that can be accessed from mobile devices. Moreover, newsletters need to be in multiple languages to accommodate diverse cultures and backgrounds.

**Resources**