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Abstract

Public schools are facing increased public scrutiny given the intense focus on academic standards and testing, increased political debate, and current economic conditions. Schools are turning to their local communities for help. This research explores the important role community engagement plays in supporting schools to realize their goals. Using stakeholder theory as a foundation, an online survey was distributed to current and former parents of students from a suburban high school to determine how community engagement can be increased. Three key findings can be highlighted. Community members are aware of the school's goals and see value in community engagement, but are not fully aware of how they can engage. Convenient and one-way communication channels are preferred; however these channels limit effective engagement. Though school officials and staff are the main preferred communication source, engagement can be increased by utilizing currently engaged parents and alumni as a source of communication.

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Public schools are facing increased public scrutiny given the intense focus on academic standards and testing, increased political debate, and current economic conditions. This combination of factors has forced school districts to shift from focusing primarily on offering a service, to needing to understand and meet the expectations of its stakeholders. Fortunately, research offers many lessons that can assist public schools in this transitory time. The concept of stakeholder engagement, which is widely popular in the business arena, can be extended to the school setting. In fact, highly successful schools have already found innovative ways to engage the community as a stakeholder group, to achieve organizational success and re-shape their operating models (National Association of State Coordinators of Compensatory Education, 1996). This research seeks to further explore stakeholder engagement in the school setting.

The process of stakeholder engagement can be described as the exchange between an organization and its internal and external stakeholder (Jaakson, 2010; Koschmann, 2007). Today's organizations are undergoing much change, which causes unrest within the organization and amongst its stakeholders. This unrest can be mitigated by increasing the engagement of stakeholders, which can be viewed as a form of communication (Lewis, 2007).

Considering engagement as a result of communication, it is critical to implement stakeholder appropriate communication strategies in order to engage stakeholder groups. Nonprofit organizations rely on external stakeholders for organizational success, yet most communicative attention is attributed to internal stakeholders (Lewis, Richardson, & Hamel, 2003). Schools are a form of nonprofit organization where external stakeholders are crucial to achieving organizational goals, and where the community is one of the largest external stakeholder groups. Therefore, community engagement in schools can be viewed as a form of stakeholder engagement (Cunningham, 2004).

Research in the education field provides insight into the importance of community engagement to the achievement of school goals (Cunningham, 2004). One of the most crucial factors in achieving school goals is to foster a collaborative environment, where open communication is at the forefront (Halawah, 2005). Schools therefore have a need to take a closer look at the needs of their local community as a stakeholder group and to learn about effective engagement strategies. Key external stakeholders to schools include parents, local businesses, and residents (Nettles, 1991). It is pertinent that these stakeholders understand, buy-in, and are involved in realizing school goals (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). This is especially true as schools are experiencing constant changes, from budget cuts to leadership changes, making a case for the need for schools to re-engage stakeholders to ensure goals can be realized.

Purpose and Goals

The purpose of this research is to identify strategies to increase community (e.g. parents, business, and other community members) engagement, with their local public high school. Engagement, for the purpose of this research is defined as collaborative community participation in school activities, as well as continuous, two-way dialog between the school and community (Farkas, S., Foley, P., Duffett, A., Foleno, T., & Johnson, J., 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). By doing so, schools can foster long term community-school connections, which result in robust partnerships that benefit both students and the community at large. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Education, high performing schools have found innovative ways to engage parents and other parts of the community for school success (NASCCE, 1996). Successful community involvement is characterized through partnerships that benefit students, families, schools, and the community (Nettles, 1991; Sanders & Harvey, 2001). Some examples of benefits include the availability of student scholarships and career

resources, family support activities, new classroom equipment and staff development opportunities, and increases in community outreach and beautification projects (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Additionally, public schools are governed by No Child Left Behind, which includes a provision that requires districts to develop and implement programs that engage families to ensure student success. In fact, Title 1 funds are appropriated based on monitoring against these requirements (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011). As schools are becoming ever more competitive, funding is dependent on school performance, and families are provided with many alternative options to public schools, it is crucial for public high schools to realize that the community is a crucial partner for success. Not engaging the community can result in decreased federal and state school funding and decreased local support in the form of resources, scholarships, and instructional materials, to name a few.

By focusing on understanding current community perceptions and involvement with the school, and learning about communication preferences, a high school can develop effective community engagement strategies. The goals of this research are to identify channels through which to engage communities in their local high schools, opportunities to increase community participation in school events and programs, and factors that drive community members to establish school-community partnerships. A review of literature on stakeholder engagement and linkages to community-school engagement follows.

Review of Literature

Theoretical Background – Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory has its roots in the business management field and asserts that an organization holds multiple relationships, internally and externally, and must be able to identify, interface, and manage each group (Koschmann, 2007). Many scholars interested in the stakeholder approach provide insight into the existence of different types of stakeholders (Jaakson, 2010; Koschmannm 2007; Lewis et al., 2003; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). For instance, Mitchell, et al. (1997) propose that there are seven classifications of stakeholders, defined by the attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency, and that each stakeholder type is managed differently based on these attributes. Latent stakeholders possess only one of the three attributes; these stakeholders have limited claim on an organization and therefore are not given priority of attention. Expectant stakeholders possess two of the three attributes. They have a more active position with the organization and are therefore attributed more attention. Only the definitive stakeholders possess all three attributes. Mitchell, et. al. (1997) suggest that managers should give this group priority as their position and influence on the organization is greatest.

Lewis, et al. (2003) identified not only internal and external stakeholders but also introduced the concept of boundary stakeholders, who are classified as those stakeholders that play a role in organizational activity but who do not have much of a role in organizational decision making. Bronn and Bronn (2011) argue that mental models, which are individual or shared views of how things work, distinguish stakeholders from one another. Organizations must continually uncover stakeholder mental models in

order to be able to develop appropriate and effective engagement strategies. Each of the above views on stakeholder classification highlights that there are differences between stakeholder groups. Organizations must recognize not only that difference exist but also understand what differentiates each stakeholder groups and what role each group can play in achieving the organization's vision and goals.

Extension of stakeholder theory can be seen in various avenues (Koschman, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Lewis, et al., 2003; Mitchell, et al., 1997). One such extension led to the development of the concepts of 'stakes' for each stakeholder group. This view of the theory states that an organization allocates stakes to each stakeholder, which in essence are the value and benefits a stakeholder provides to the organization. This then provides the organization with guidance on where its focus should be, with more focus on those stakeholders that provide higher value to the organization (Lewis, et al., 2003). Another area of extension was provided by Mitchell, et al. (1997), who contributed to the theory by developing the model of stakeholder salience using the attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency. Power and legitimacy were already broadly used in various stakeholder approaches and organizational theories; they are argued to be interrelated yet distinct, where power is defined as the ability an individual has to achieve their desired outcomes, and legitimacy is defined as a general assumption that actions and behaviors are socially acceptable (Mitchel, et al., 1997). However, Mitchell, et al. (1997) added the attribute of urgency, which provides dynamism to the stakeholder salience. Urgency must be viewed from the perspective of how time sensitive the stakeholder claims are to the organization and how critical the relationship is (Mitchel, et al, 1997). Much research has been devoted to the area of stakeholder identification and differentiation; however a gap remains in understating how to engage stakeholders once they have been identified. The next section will review literature on the role of communication in stakeholder engagement.

Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Scholarly research has sought to link the stakeholder approach more closely with communication, suggesting that communication is a key enabler to stakeholder engagement (Bronn & Bronn, 2003; Jaakson, 2010; Koschmann, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Lewis, et al., 2003). Research suggests that communication is critical for internal and external stakeholder engagement (Jaakson, 2010; Koschmann, 2007), and that effective communication strategies should consider both channels and sources of communication (Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

Lewis, et al. (2003) identified a gap in stakeholder literature in how and with which stakeholder groups mangers should communicate. They explored the degree of communication attention and the content of the communication for internal, external, and boundary stakeholder groups. Lewis, et al. (2003) found that internal stakeholders are communicated to more frequently and contacted earlier than both external and boundary stakeholders. Additionally, there seemed to be no significant difference between the stakeholder group and topics communicated (Lewis, et al., 2003), suggesting that the channel and timing of communication takes precedence over the topic of the message.

Jaakson (2010) conducted work along a similar vein, looking at how stakeholder engagement differs by stakeholder type, by exploring the role stakeholders play in formulating organizational value statements. She suggests that each stakeholder group is impacted differently by organizational value statements and that the level of impact drives the selection of stakeholder specific engagement strategies. Informational strategies suffice in engaging low impacted stakeholder groups. Moderately impacted groups should be engaged in a consultative manner, and highly impacted stakeholder groups should be engaged through the formation of partnerships (Jaakson, 2010). This model suggests that organizations can increase the effectiveness of their engagement communication strategies by utilizing more collaborative and two-way communication channels with medium to high impacted stakeholder groups.

Much literature can be found providing support for the need for two-way communication strategies with stakeholders (Bronn & Bronn, 2003; Koschmann, 2007), which can be described as moving stakeholder engagement to an integrated model, where both sides of the sender-receiver communication process are considered. This perspective extends the stakeholder model from the individual viewpoints of the organization and the stakeholder, to the complex interaction between the two sides (Koschmann, 2007). These complex relations must be managed via appropriate communication that considers and allows participation from both the organization and stakeholder, which Bronn and Bronn (2003) refer to as the co-orientation model. Two-way communication can facilitate the process of distinguishing between differing mental models of each stakeholder groups. (Bronn & Bronn, 2003). The importance of two-way communication is supported by the argument that engaging stakeholders in communicative dialog will heighten the feeling of participation in organizational decision making (Koschmann, 2007). It is important to note that in order for stakeholders to effectively participate and contribute to the organization, a shared understanding of the organizational vision and goals must first be gained (Farmer, Slater, & Wright, 1998). Though leadership generally drives the organizational vision, successful organizations are able to share ownership of achieving this vision with all organizational members (Farmer, et. al., 1998), which, from the stakeholder perspective, includes both internal and external stakeholder groups (Koschmann, 2007). The next section will shift attention from general discussion of stakeholder engagement and the role of communication, to community engagement in the educational setting.

Community Engagement as a Form of Stakeholder Engagement

Lewis, et al. (2003) identified a gap in stakeholder literature applying the stakeholder approach to nonprofits organizations. They suggest that nonprofit organizations have a need to identify the most effective ways of engaging internal and external stakeholders to achieve organizational goals, and propose that communication is a key component of engagement (Lewis, et al., 2003). External stakeholders are highly important to nonprofit organizations, as they provide necessary resources and funding to ensure goals can be met, yet many nonprofits focus their communication efforts on internal stakeholders (Lewis, et al., 2003). These findings provide insight that nonprofits have an opportunity to be more strategic in their stakeholder engagement approaches, by focusing on external stakeholders (Lewis, et al., 2003).

Expanding this view from nonprofits in general to the secondary education arena, community engagement can be described as a form of stakeholder engagement, where the community is the key stakeholder group of interest to a school (Cunningham, 2004; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). School districts have a need to track against and meet state and federally imposed performance standards, develop programs for school improvement, and ensure finances are secured (Cunningham, 2004; Nettles 1991). There is a strong awareness amongst school districts that community support plays a critical role in achieving these goals (Farkas, et al., 2001). However, there seems to be a disconnect between a school's intent of engaging communities and the reality of day-to-day operations and actions. According to Farkas, et al. (2001), 78% of superintendents reported that they had a process underway or planned to engage the community, however 41% of superintendents stated they engaged the community in developing and implementing these processes only after decisions had already been made within the district. For effective public engagement, a school district must integrate community engagement processes as part of their standard operating procedures (Cunningham, 2004).

Farkas, et al. (2001) suggest that continuous and dynamic communication methods are the most effective means of enabling the process of engagement. This view is supported by other scholars, who provide insight into the crucial role communication plays in the process of community engagement (Bronn & Bronn, 2003; Burbank & Hunter, 2008; Farkas, et al., 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Scholars in areas of both stakeholder and community engagement underscore the role that leadership plays in enabling communication (Burbank & Hunter, 2008; Farkas, et al, 2001; Koschmann, 2007; Lewis, et al., 2003; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). The next section will discuss the linkage between leadership and community-school engagement.

The Role of Leadership in Community Engagement

Leadership plays a key role in school improvement, specifically in the creation and sustainment of community partnerships. Epstein, et al. (2011) argue that the key success factor to the number of effective programs at a given school is consistency. It is the responsibility of district and school leadership to take the role of advocating and facilitating partnerships, to ensure consistency (Epstein, et al., 2011). Spending more time on facilitating partnerships will shift focus away from traditional measurement against federally or state imposed mandates and to community collaboration, in an effort to achieve long term success and school improvement (Epstein, et al., 2011). Sanders and Harvey (2004) also point out the important role district and school leadership play in the development and sustainment of effective community partnerships. They propose that it does not matter who initiates the partnership, but rather that there is a forum and support for partnerships and that partnerships can be sustained. It is school and district leadership who provide support for and build a school climate that emphasizes the importance of community partnerships (Farkas, et al., 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

Focusing on broader community involvement, Cunningham (2004) suggests that principals play a key role in reinforcing the value of community involvement within the school and to district leadership. Active support from top levels of leadership within

a school will provide an indication to stakeholders, internal and external, that there is a focus on engagement (Farkas, et al., 2001). Reinforcing this point within the community helps build individual advocates for community engagement who provide natural growth to community engagement programs (Epstein, et al., 2011). School leadership must take an active approach to ensuring the value and focus of engagement is known and understood across all stakeholders (Epstein, et al., 2011). Leadership, therefore, acts as an initiating factor to community engagement.

Review of literature thus far has shown the important role communication, leadership, and shared vision play in stakeholder engagement, and has also drawn a distinction between stakeholder engagement and community engagement in the educational setting. Next, models for successful community engagement are discussed.

Models for Community Engagement and the Role of Communication

Many models for community engagement have been presented by scholars and recommendations for best practices have been proposed. One such model, the community advocacy model (CAM), provides insight for practitioners to the roles and benefits of community partnerships (Burbank & Hunter, 2008). One of the outcomes of this study was that the collaborative approach for school success was less driven by the school as the initiating party, but rather focused on true collaboration between key stakeholders working in partnership to increase mutual understanding. This suggests that schools must seek to understand the needs of the local community and parents to better be able to design engagement strategies that will benefit the school and larger community (Burbank & Hunter, 2008; Farkas, et al., 2001). Cunningham (2004) also points to the importance of shared goals in creating family and community engagement that is valuable and sustainable. When families understand and take part in setting school vision and achieving school goals, accountability is shared between the school and families. Additional insight is provided by Epstein, et al. (2011), who propose that an organization's success in implementing basic factors for partnerships, such as developing plans or establishing teams, is a key predecessor to being able to focus on more complex areas such as engagement of all parents within the community. This research suggests that focus on basics and a core group of individuals will provide a solid foundation on which further development and growth of engagement can be built, specifically through growth of parent advocates for community engagement (Epstein, et al., 2011).

For successful community partnerships to be sustained not only must leadership be supportive and build a school climate that values community engagement, but two-way communication between the school and parents must be maintained to determine the right kind of involvement (Sanders and Harvey, 2002). Lewis, et al. (2003) support this notion and suggest that communication strategies to external stakeholders must be put in place for engagement to be effective. Continuous feedback between stakeholders and the organization is essential (Farkas, et al, 2011). Cunningham (2004) offers five channels that school leadership can utilize to engage communities: focus groups, telephone polling, public meetings, email, and study circles; however rather than simply implementing

any one of these strategies, it is crucial for high schools to uncover stakeholder specific preferences and perceptions.

As discussed above, many forms of community engagement exist, and all models reviewed share the common focus of enabling two-way communication. To ensure that the needs of various stakeholder groups can be met, communication preferences must be identified. Additionally, in order for community engagement to be effective and two-way communication to be focused, it is critical that school communities have a shared understanding and ownership of the school's vision and goals. As such, the following three research questions have been posed:

RQ1 - In what ways are community members currently involved with their local high school?

RQ2 - What are community members' current knowledge and perception of their local high school's vision and goals?

RQ3 - What communication source and channel preferences exist within the community when communicating with their local high school?

Methodology

Participants

A high school in suburban Philadelphia was selected as the sample school for this study. Over the past three years the high school has undergone significant leadership changes in the principal and assistance principal ranks, and, therefore, has a strong desire to re-engage the local community. This study was distributed to individuals maintained in the high school database, consisting mainly of parents of current or former students. Of the total 896 individuals that received the survey, 91 responded, resulting in a response rate of 10%. Of the respondents, 79% (n=71) were female. Additionally, 93% (n=85) they currently have or had a student who attended the high school, 45% (n=41) have or had a student who attended the middle school, and 40% (n=36) have or had a student who attended elementary school. Three respondents (3%) who indicated they did not have nor do they currently have a student enrolled in any school at the district. Responses from these surveys were included in data analysis since the overarching goals of the research are not limited to parent engagement. The distribution of the length of time respondents have lived in the district ranged from one to twenty years or more, with the majority (n=51; 56%) of respondents having lived in the district for sixteen or more years.

Instrument and Procedure

To collect data for this study, an online survey was developed, distributed via email, and administered via Survey Monkey (Appendix). The email highlighted that participation was voluntary, responses anonymous and that the survey would remain open for two weeks. A survey was chosen because it is an appropriate means when trying to learn about individuals' attitudes and beliefs (Keyton, 2010). Online distribution was selected because of ease and low cost; it was also the preferred means of distribution by

the school. The survey consisted of ten questions, three of which were demographic in nature. Questions asked about community-school engagement and vision and goals, as well as the likelihood of respondents using specific communication methods. Input was also solicited on community-school events respondents currently participate in, reasons respondents may not currently be involved, preferences in how respondents would like to be communicated to, and whom respondents would contact to get engaged. One general open-ended question was included at the end of the survey that asked participants to provide any other thoughts or comments on how to increase community engagement with the high school.

Analysis

For each multiple choice and likert-scale question, frequency counts and percentage of total were tabulated and analyzed. Textual analysis, which is a way of analyzing messages and identifying themes (Keyton, 2010), was used to review the responses to the open ended questions as well as the 'other' category within the multiple choice questions. To ensure accuracy of analysis, additional items reported within 'other' required careful review, to determine if any responses may have been covered in the pre-provided choices. Any such items were not included in data analysis to avoid double counting. All other items were coded into categories.

Results

Although not all questions were completed on each returned survey, all surveys were able to be used in aggregate data analysis in one way or another. A summary of results, grouped by research questions is provided below.

Research Question 1: In what ways are community members currently involved with their local high school?

The community was most involved in Operation FOCUS post prom (57%; n=51), the Parent Principal Forum (25%; n=22), and community service projects (18%; n=16). Other ways of involvement included community cleanup days, internships, scholarships, teacher professional development, and guest speakers; each received fewer than ten total responses (<10%). Twenty-six respondents (29%) reported they currently do not support any community-school event. A total of twenty-six entries (29%) were made in the other category. Of these, thirteen responses (15%) were related to sporting events, five to clubs (6%), and three (3%) to teacher or project specific support. Five of the responses were not included in analysis as they were duplicates of the pre-defined category, community projects.

Lack of time (n=41; 54%) and lack of awareness of opportunities (n=37; 49%) were the most common reasons community members listed as preventing them from engaging with the school. Other reasons included lack of interest (n=3; 4%), do not see value/benefit (n=1; 1%), and do not know how to connect (n=7; 9%). Nine respondents (12%) reported that there is nothing that prevents them from supporting events. A total of twelve responses (16%) were received in the other category; four (5%) respondents listed scheduling conflicts, four (5%) listed issues with the communica-

tion or organization of events, two (3%) stated they were committed elsewhere, and one (1%) listed lack of funds as a reason. One response in the other category was removed from analysis as it stated 'unaware of opportunities' which was a pre-defined answer.

RQ1 is answered in two parts. First, community members are currently involved in student centric activities (e.g. Operation FOCUS, community services projects, and sporting events) and informational activities such as the Parent Principal Forum. Second, community involvement is limited primarily due to lack of time and a lack of awareness of opportunities.

Research Question 2: What are community members' current knowledge and perception of their local high school's vision and goals?

The majority of respondents (61%; n = 55) agreed or strongly agreed that they were aware of the high school's vision; 21% (n = 19) were neutral and 18% (n = 16) disagreed/strongly disagreed. The majority of respondents (61.1%; n = 55) also agreed that they play a role in achieving the school's vision and goals; 26.4% (n = 24) were neutral and 13% (n = 12) disagreed/strongly disagreed. Of the ninety-one respondents, 37% (n=34) strongly agreed that they see value in engaging with the school to help it achieve its goals, and 58% (n=49) agreed; 9% (n=8) were neutral or disagreed. Respondents (60%; n=54) also indicated that they are aware that there are opportunities for the community to engage with the school; 26% (n=23) were neutral on this item, and 14% (n=13) indicated they were not aware of opportunities.

The most common response to the statement *the school informs the community about school goals and progress in achieving them* was neutral (41%; n=37); 36.3% (n=33) agreed or strongly agreed and 23% (n=21) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. The most common response to the statement *the school solicits input from community members on programs and opportunities* was neutral (55%; n=50); 24% (n=19) responded that they agreed or strongly agreed and 21% (n=19) responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed. To the statement *Community-school partnerships provide a benefit to students*, 89% of respondents (n=81) agreed or strongly agreed. To the statement *Community-school partnerships provide a benefit to the community*, 90% of respondents (n=82) agreed or strongly agreed.

In response to RQ2, the majority of community members are aware of the school's vision and goals, believe they play a role in achieving school goals, and see value and benefits in community-school engagement. Varied perceptions exist regarding the school informing the community about progress against goals and soliciting input from the community.

Research Question 3: What communication source and channel preferences exist within the community when communicating with their local high school?

Direct email from the school (83%; n=75) and postings on the school website (62%; n=56) were the most preferred ways for respondents to receive communication from the school. Local newspaper articles (n=30) and a school newsletter/bulletin (n=37)

were preferred by 30% of respondents; while students, word of mouth, phone calls, community groups, and local establishments were each preferred by 15-28% of respondents. A total of eight entries were made in the other category. Of these, seven suggested the school utilize non-traditional communication channels and one listed the school's student run TV station as a channel of communication.

The majority (52%; n=46) of respondents indicated that they would contact the high school central administration office to become engaged in community-school events. High school guidance counselors and other parents both were checked by 36% of respondents each (n=32). Other responses included high school principals (n=23; 26%), students (n=21; 24%), other community members (n=20; 23%), and high school teachers (n=17; 19%). Six respondents provided a response in the 'other' category, which included lack of knowledge of who to contact (n=2) and apprehension to initiate (n=1). The three other responses, related to community members, were removed from analysis as this was a pre-defined answer. Analysis of the open-ended question also listed the suggestion to utilize Alumni, which could be included in the community member group, but is listed separately here to avoid mis-interpretation.

Respondents reported that sending email to the school was the most likely means of communication they would employ; 68% of respondents (n=60) selected very likely and 27% (n=24) selected likely. Fifty-four respondents (67%) indicated that they are not likely to send a letter to the school; 14% (n=11) indicated that they would be likely/very likely to use this mean of communication. The majority of respondents indicated that they would be likely (57%; n=48) or very likely (27%; n=23) to call the school via phone. Visiting the school in person, attending a community event, attending the monthly Parent Principal Forum, and contacting an engaged community member all received similar responses, with 41-47% (n=34-38) of respondents indicating they would be likely to use this communication mean, and dispersed responses across not likely, somewhat likely, and neutral.

RQ3 is answered in three parts: first, channel preferences for receiving information; second, communication source preferences; third, channel preferences for sending information. Preferred channels as receivers of information are email from the school and postings on the school website, the preferred channel for sending information is email, and the preferred sources of information are school leadership and staff. Analysis of the general open-ended question also resulted in a total of fifteen ideas or changes for community-school programs and engagement strategies. These do not address any of the posed research questions, however they are considered in the discussion section.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to identify strategies to increase community engagement with their local public high schools. By pursuing this study, the high school is working toward the set study goals of identifying channels through which to engage the community, opportunities to increase community participation in school events and programs, and factors that drive community members to establish school-community partnerships. The following provides a discussion of key themes and associated recommendations.

Value of Engagement and Link to Vision and Goals

In order for community school engagement to be valuable, it must be tied to the vision and goals of the organization (Farmer, et. al., 1998). This not only strengthens the feeling of involvement (Koschmann, 2007) by community members but also results in engagement that supports the achievement of goals (Cunningham, 2004). In this study, respondents indicated that they are aware of the existence of a school vision and goals. Respondents also indicated that they play a role in achieving the vision and goals and that community involvement is crucial for school success. This is in line with research, which states that the school and community must understand and value community-school partnerships (Farkas, et al., 2001; Farmer, et. al., 1998) and that focusing on this basic premise is a stepping stone to achieving more broad reaching engagement levels (Epstein, et. al., 2011). Findings of this study suggest that though community members appear to be aware of the school goals and see their role as important, school outreach regarding progress toward goals and opportunities for engagement seems to be lacking. According to Lewis et. al., (2003), the timing and channel of communication is highly important and even takes precedence over the topic being communicated. Respondents indicate that the timing and way in which the school communicates to them leaves room for improvement. As per one respondent's suggestion on how to increase engagement, there is a need for "vastly improved communication, communications are inadequate and not timely. Most communications from the district, school, and administration are sent out too late and with little notice!"

Current community engagement at the high school where this study was conducted can mostly be seen in the form of participation at parent run and student-centric events, such as graduation related and sporting events. Literature indicates that tremendous value can stem from community-school partnerships in the form of student scholarships and career resources, family activity offerings, new classroom equipment and staff development opportunities, and community outreach and beautification projects (Sanders & Harvey, 2002); however few such instances are seen at the case school. In addition to current engagement being focused on student centric activities, a third of respondents to this study also indicated that they currently do not support any community-school activities. Lack of time and an unawareness of opportunities appear to be the most commonly listed reasons for not engaging. This is a crucial finding because though there is clear interest to engage, as seen in the responses to the value and benefit of community engagement, there is a lack of engagement. One respondent summarized this point clearly: "present opportunities to participate on a regular basis, a lot of us are willing." This suggests that opportunities for engagement need to be made more public and be designed in a way to not require large amounts of time from participants.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the school should be more proactive in their communication to the community about school goals and progress in meeting them, as well as opportunities for the community to engage. Additionally, opportunities should be focused less on specific events and rather be more aligned with the school's goals. One way the school could

try to solicit support for these types of opportunities is by being explicit in what is needed and how this ties back to the school vision and goals, such as asking for internship opportunities from local businesses. Literature speaks to the importance of two-way dialog and continuous flow of information (Bronn & Bronn, 2003; Koschmann, 2007). The high school should focus on how to encourage this continuous flow of information. The next section will look at specific communication preferences, which the school leadership can capitalize on to enable a two-way, continuous flow of information.

Means of Communication (Receiver and Originator)

Research shows that communication is an enabler of stakeholder engagement (Lewis, 2007) and this study provides insight into the community communication preferences. Communication, in this case, needs to be thought of both in terms of community members being receivers and senders of messages. Traditional communication channels such as email appear to be the most preferred channels for community members to receive information from the school. As one respondent stated, the "school should send more communication via email. Most people have email on their cell phone and/or have email up during work hours." Currently, the school also relies on students as being a messenger between the school and parents. Many respondents indicated that this may not be the best means for engaging community members and parents. As per one respondent, "communicate with parents often, not necessarily through students. Students tend to not inform parents as often as we would like." Other preferred means incorporated local community resources such as the local newspaper and a school bulletin or newsletter. These preferences, each can be thought of as enabling one-way flow of communication, and truly do not get at the dialog that research has indicated to be so invaluable to successful community engagement (Cunningham, 2004; Farkas, et al., 2001; Koschmann, 2007).

As senders of messages, community members also prefer convenient, one-way communication channels. The majority of respondents indicated that they would be very likely to send emails to the school if they wanted to get engaged. However, communication channels that require physical action or more time on behalf of the originator, such as going to a meeting or finding a community member who is already engaged, may not be a consistently utilized communication channel by the community. This is also in line with the finding that lack of time is one of the main reasons that people do not currently engage. Additionally, "because the Parent Principal Forums are at the same time on the same day of the week, every month, they conflict with other community obligations" therefore making it nearly impossible for interested individuals who have other commitments to attend any of these sessions. This creates an additional barrier for interested community members to engage in dynamic dialog with the school.

Based on the communication preferences expressed by the community, communication is one-way and low in dialog. Enabling two-way communication is crucial to successful engagement (Bronn & Bronn, 2003; Koschmann, 2007). Though quick and convenient channels, such as email and the school website, seem to appeal to the community and should be encouraged, collaborative and interactive dialog will not be created via these chan-

nels. To enable two-way communication, the school must allow for mechanisms where the school and community can engage in continuous dialog (Farkas, et al., 2001; Koschman, 2007). Physical meetings, while effective (Burbank & Hunter, 2008), seem to only address the preferences of a portion of the target audience for this study. However, there seems to be a strong preference for quick and convenient channels of communication. One recommendation that school can implemented to capitalize on both expressed preferences is implementing a community engagement section on their website and offer a "submit a question or provide feedback" functionality, where community members can easily inquire or provide input. Incoming messages will need to be monitored by the high school leadership team. This community engagement section can be used to highlight opportunities for engagement, list upcoming meetings, highlight members of the community who are engaged, provide updates and status on school goals, and offer the mechanism for community members to submit questions or feedback. This would allow for the creation of dialog and inter-activity, and would still be in line with the preference expressed by the community. The final area of discussion is concerned with preferences related to sources of communication.

Sources of communication

Effective communication strategies must not consider simply the communication channel, but also the communication source (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Findings from this study indicate preferences for sources of communication and show that school officials are the most preferred source for school related communication. This seems natural, as school officials are at the core of the school and community members turn to school leadership to gauge if engagement is supported (Farkas, et al., 2001). However, literature shows that community engagement is most effective when communication does not only originate from the school, but rather when actively engaged community members become local advocates for school engagement (Burbank & Hunter, 2008). The findings of this study indicate that parents seem to be natural sources of information on school activities, however did not reveal that other community members are a preferred source of communication amongst the community.

One speculation is that it may not be apparent who the actively engaged members of the community are. The school therefore needs to find ways to increase visibility of engaged community members. Given that respondents indicated they are likely to reach out to other parents, one recommendation is that the school be more transparent to the community about the parents who are actively engaged and ask these parents to be available for inquiries. This would start to build a network of community advocates, starting with highly engaged parents. Community advocates should extend beyond parents though (Burbank & Hunter, 2008). An additional recommendation is for the school to consider alumni as a group to support building the community advocate network. As one respondent stated, "there is a very strong alumni presence in the community that the district could engage." Focusing on these two groups would provide the high school with a small core group of individuals to start to build a community advocate network, which will provide a solid foundation on which further development and growth of engagement can be built (Epstein, et. al., 2011).

In summary, there are three key recommendations the school can take based on findings from this study and the review of literature. First, be more proactive and transparent in communicating with the community about opportunities for community engagement that are linked to school goals. Second, increase use of email and the school website to disperse communication, while also creating a community engagement space on the website to post and solicit information and enable two-way dialog. And third, solicit engaged parents and alumni to help build a community advocate network, to serve as an alternate source of communication regarding community engagement and provide a means of physical engagement beyond the website and email with the school.

Limitations

The original intent for distribution of this study was to solicit participants via stratified random samples from the school district's community database, with sub-groups defined as parents, local businesses, and other community members. However, the school district only approved access to the database managed by the high school rather than the full community database. This database still consists of the parents of all current and some former high school students, which provided access to a crucial set of individuals within the community. Future research would benefit from expanding the audience to the community at large, including local business and other community members, not just parents. Given the participants, to whom this study was distributed, it must also be noted that the timing of release of this survey was not ideal. The study was distributed during the summer months, after graduation and before the start of the new school year. As such, parents of students who just graduated and parents of students who would be freshmen in the fall, are likely to not have been interested in or even part of the database. This may be one reason for a lower than expected response rate. Future studies should be conducted during the academic year. Lastly, survey questions referring to existing community members or individuals who are already engaged should be defined more clearly in future studies. Review of the open-ended responses indicated that these definitions were not clear to all respondents. Future studies should provide clear definitions as part of the survey instrument.

Conclusion

With amplified focus and scrutiny on the effectiveness and budgets of public schools, there is an increased need for schools to ensure they understand and meet stakeholder needs. Of specific interest in this study were external stakeholders, which for schools consist of the local community. As such, the need for schools to increase community engagement to meet established school goals was identified. Not doing so could result in loss of funding, inadequate progress against standards, and a decrease in local support and resources. In order to increase community engagement, schools must focus on implementing strategies that will encourage increased community participation in school events or programs and will increase the amount of two-way communication between the school and community. Taking into consideration the communication source and channel preferences that the community holds, allows for schools to develop strategies that focus on the needs of their target audience, which in turn reinforces the notion that the community plays a crucial role in achieving school goals.

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