

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN PLANNING

Office of Family School and Community Partnerships



COLORADO
Department of Education

Family and community engagement is required in all Colorado schools and districts. Meaningful stakeholder engagement includes systems, structures, and conditions that ensure the ongoing collaboration and input of a variety of stakeholders who represent the demographics and the needs of schools and districts. This guidance has been developed to assist districts and schools as they engage stakeholders in a variety of planning activities, including Strategic Planning, Unified Improvement Planning, ESEA and Title 1 Program Planning, and other required Support and Improvement Planning.

Create an Inclusive Culture

Offer multiple ways and opportunities for stakeholders to engage.

Provide flexible options and maximize existing structures, events, and data:

- Gather input, both formally and informally, anytime, or anywhere families gather.
- Offer a variety of flexible options and schedules for stakeholders to engage and take advantage of existing stakeholder groups such as School or District Accountability Committees and Parent/Teacher groups to gather input.
- Maximize scheduled school events such as Parent-Teacher Conferences, Back to School Nights, and Family Learning Nights, as opportunities to provide information and gather stakeholder perceptions.
- Regular data collections can also be summarized and applied to improvement planning, including the Teaching and Learning Conditions Colorado (TLCC) survey, and district or community perception data.

Leverage technology for ease and access:

- Translation tools and closed captions are essential to addressing language barriers when working collaboratively with families and community members.
- Online survey tools allow stakeholders to provide input and see the input of others more easily. Keep electronic surveys short, requiring no more than 10 minutes to complete. Google Forms can be used to create simple surveys for a quick turnaround of ideas and feedback.
- Consider using perception surveys that include both open-ended questions to illuminate values, experiences, and beliefs, as well as Likert-scale questions to gauge consensus on priorities and proposed improvement efforts.



Create an
Inclusive
Culture

- ✓ Offer multiple ways and opportunities for stakeholders to engage.
- ✓ Invite diverse perspectives that represent school demographics and the lived experiences of families.



Build
Trusting
Relationships

- ✓ Personalize and simplify ongoing two-way communication with stakeholders.
- ✓ Illuminate family/community assets to find common ground and develop shared goals.



Design
Capacity-Building
Opportunities

- ✓ Integrate the assets and expertise of families, internal staff, and community partners.
- ✓ Facilitate discussions that support collaboration and build collective capacity.



Dedicate
Necessary
Resources

- ✓ Prioritize ongoing, meaningful, and engaging opportunities for stakeholder involvement.
- ✓ Improve engagement through community partnerships.

Invite diverse perspectives that represent school demographics and the lived experiences of families.

Address barriers to engagement and assemble focus(ed) groups:

- When planning for engagement, identify and address potential barriers that distract or interfere with meaningful stakeholder involvement. Identify challenges that exist for certain groups. Addressing language differences, providing childcare and/or food, and scheduling different times, days, and locations can increase participation.
- It is important to include stakeholders that adequately represent school or district demographics and commit to recruiting/including stakeholders from traditionally underrepresented student groups.
- To build stakeholder capacity and confidence, consider assembling intentional focus groups and affinity networks. Focus groups bring together small groups of people using defined demographic traits and questions designed to shed light on a specific topic. Affinity groups are based on shared interests, identities, and social networks.

...with good planning, thoughtful implementation, well-designed activities, and pointed improvements, more and more families and teachers can learn to work with one another on behalf of the children whose interests they share.

-Joyce Epstein, 2010

Tap into internal/external partnerships:

- Many district and community working groups already exist and can be leveraged to reach a more diverse group of stakeholders. These include local groups that represent culturally diverse stakeholders such as immigrant and indigenous populations; topic-specific groups like community planning committees and community housing/hunger alliances; as well as community-based organizations such as the YMCA and United Way.
- Staff are stakeholders too. Including internal stakeholder groups such as teachers, counselors, coaches, and nutrition staff can broaden perspectives and increase diversity in stakeholder groups.

Build Trusting Relationships

Simplify and personalize ongoing two-way communication with stakeholders.

Simplify the complex:

- Set the conditions for meaningful engagement by helping families feel confident and competent as partners and collaborators. Speaking “over the heads” of families leads to disengagement.
- Simplify and summarize complex information by using social rather than academic language, and vocabulary that does not exceed an 8th grade level.
- Avoid jargon and multi-meaning words, and use simple, direct language when communicating with families, particularly when language translation is needed.
- Use icons, graphs, and tables to represent complex data, and encourage participants to interpret and interact with the data in multiple ways.

Personalize the experience:

- Invite stakeholders to engage using personalized letters, postcards, messages, and emails rather than relying on generic form letters or automated messaging for communication. Learn and strive to use the communication preferences of your families whenever possible.

- Group participants in ways that leverage and enhance existing social networks and common experiences. Create a comfortable and flexible environment for collaborative work, with refreshments, room to mix and move, and ample opportunities for breaks.
- Engage families and community members in ongoing and recurring ways that honor their unique lived experiences, convey the value of their input, and personally invite their participation.

Illuminate family/community assets to find common ground and develop shared goals.

Leverage families' lived experiences:

- By understanding the lived experiences of our families, educators are better able to find common ground and leverage shared beliefs and values to achieve our goals.
- Families possess funds of knowledge and experiences that are often quite different from our own, and from other families. Plan for interactions that recognize and include those diverse assets and perspectives. Make space for different voices to be heard, honored, and incorporated into collaborative work.
- Be intentional about identifying and integrating the expertise of families; compensating them for their time, knowledge, and insights when possible; and acting upon the learnings that are derived from those conversations.

Illuminate and commit to shared goals:

- Decades of research confirm that when educators commit to improvement goals that are co-developed with families, and focus on increasing family engagement, we see progress toward school and district improvement targets and goals.
- To find common ground and illuminate shared goals, start by learning from families about their priorities, concerns, interests, and knowledge, and provide context to identify where these intersect with the improvement needs identified by the school.
- Anchor collaborative improvement work with stakeholders to the lived experiences of families and make explicit connections to their students' own educational experiences to build confidence and a sense of efficacy in stakeholders.

Design Capacity Building Opportunities

Integrate the assets and expertise of families, internal staff, and community partners.

Plan ahead to engage diverse stakeholders and leverage their unique expertise and assets:

- Assemble stakeholders who bring different perspectives to the process and plan intentionally for content and entry points that fit the assets and expertise of each group. For example, student outcomes and school culture are entry points for discussion that are compatible with both family and staff expertise, and a place where these stakeholders can apply their personal and professional knowledge with confidence.
- The development of programs and activities is an area where community partners, in addition to staff and families, can provide valuable insight into the needs of the community, and offer effective strategies for supporting students and families.

Student outcomes and school culture are entry points for discussion that are compatible with both family and staff expertise, and a place where these stakeholders can apply their personal and professional knowledge with confidence.

- Collaboration and discussion designed to leverage and elevate different voices and perspectives can broaden our own thinking and enhance the collective capacity of all.

Illuminate the important aspects of dual-capacity building and shared leadership:

- Well-planned opportunities support capacity building for both schools and stakeholders by increasing skills and knowledge, making connections, shifting beliefs and values, and building the confidence of all participants.
- Identify shared goals (our collective purpose), illuminate social connections (important models of support), and establish structures for all members to contribute (elevating individual voices and perspectives). This takes intentional planning, and the dedication of both time and resources. Shared goals set the conditions for purposeful interaction and keep teams focused on outcomes. Strong social connections provide the emotional safety needed for team members to actively engage, and a focus on amplifying stakeholder voice improves equity and balances power in collaborative interactions.

Facilitate discussions that support collaboration and build collective capacity.

Use collaborative inquiry and discussion protocols:

- To ensure stakeholders feel confident and competent to engage in improvement planning, make time and space for authentic inquiry, wherein stakeholders make meaning of information together. Protocols for inquiry, discussion, and consensus-building are useful tools that bring structure to our collaborative work and increase collective capacity. Many examples can be found at <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/>.
- Important elements of active facilitation include scaffolding to equip participants with the foundational knowledge and skills needed to engage; linking content and activities to shared goals and personal/professional relevance; and scaling the facilitated collaboration to group size, structure, and makeup.

Facilitate and communicate throughout the process:

- It is important for educators to remember that when engaging with stakeholders, educators are facilitators, not teachers. The role of the facilitator is to use active listening strategies to mediate thinking, encourage discussion, and foster new ideas. Contrast this with the role of the teacher, often dispensing knowledge through one-way communication toward predetermined goals.
- To enhance and sustain engagement, two-way communication throughout the process is essential. This includes establishing a level playing field, sharing a vision for collaboration, maintaining open lines of two-way communication throughout the process, and closing the loop so stakeholders see how their input and engagement impact school progress, policies, and outcomes.

Dedicate Necessary Resources

Prioritize ongoing, meaningful, and engaging opportunities for stakeholder involvement.

Support a continuous cycle of engagement:

- Authentic and meaningful stakeholder engagement occurs in an ongoing, continuous way throughout and across school years. This requires intentional planning for the dedication of time, as well as human and financial resources.
- Specifically, school/program improvement planning is a continuous cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of outcomes. To meaningfully engage stakeholders in the process, set aside time

and resources for ongoing stakeholder opportunities that go beyond a “one-off” event or meeting and include multiple access points and communication strategies that continue throughout the year. Frequency and consistency, no matter how big or small the engagement opportunity may be, are important to build and sustain the relationships and practices that lead to meaningful engagement.

Establish a school-based team of educators:

- School-based team-driven shared leadership ensures time and resources are allocated to support ongoing, high-quality capacity building for staff, and multiple points of contact for all stakeholders.
- School-based teams create and communicate a common vision, use organizational structures and processes to integrate improvement efforts across other decision-making teams, and monitor the effectiveness of improvement efforts. It is also a great way to share the responsibilities and lighten the load for teachers and staff.

Improve engagement through community-based partnerships.

Maintain and leverage community-based resources:

- Many problems of practice in schools can be addressed more effectively in partnership with community-based organizations.
- Community partners can assist schools with outreach and the resources necessary to address barriers to engagement and bring diverse stakeholders together. Consider holding a meeting or focus group at a community location where families gather or receive resources, and leveraging community partners' communication channels to invite the participation of the families they serve.

Develop intentional partnerships with community organizations:

- Leveraging the skills and knowledge of community partners honors the local context and enhances the experience for all stakeholders.
- Schools and community organizations often have “shared stakeholders,” further personalizing the process for both families and providers.
- Local organizations can provide valuable insight into the needs of the community and lend topic- or group-specific expertise to the planning and improvement process.
- Building and deepening community partnerships enhances the stakeholder engagement experience and creates important social intersections within communities.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

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Promising Partnership Practices: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/familyengagement/promising>

