The new superintendent's guide to community engagement

"The central idea behind public engagement is not public relations but getting the public to own its own schools.

You may be tempted to think of the schools as yours. They're not. In the final analysis, they belong to the public.

If local citizens don't feel that deep in their bones, you will not be able to count on public support when you need it.

It's important, therefore, that you get your local community thoroughly engaged, connected, and deeply committed

to its schools." — The Superintendent's Fieldbook[1]

Introduction

Whether you're brand new to being a superintendent or are just starting out at a new district, your challenge is unique. You are expected to listen to stakeholders to discover priorities and build trust, while at the same time provide a plan and vision for the district—all of which need to be informed by stakeholder priorities and again require their trust for support. Doing all of this at the same time is no easy task.

"You're not supposed to have a strategic plan going in, because the community wants you to listen and understand them first," explains Dr. David Vannasdall, Superintendent of California's Arcadia Unified School District. "But the first thing after you're hired, everyone says: 'What's your plan? What are your goals for the district?' It's a very vulnerable situation to be in."

Over the past four years, Thoughtexchange has helped incoming district superintendents across the nation build trust and discover stakeholder priorities. Rich data from their exchanges can be used to drive strategic plans and other decisions that are well-received by stakeholders because they clearly reflect their stated priorities—often in their own words.

In the following pages, we'll explore some of the challenges many superintendents face when they're new to the job or at a new district—and how Thoughtexchange helps education leaders succeed.

[1] The Superintendent's Fieldbook - https://books.google.ca/books?id=PeZ0AwAAQBAJ&source=gbs_similarbooks

Building trust

"Being chosen does not mean being trusted. New superintendents have won over the school board by being hired, but the bigger challenge is to gain the trust of the local community—and other civic leaders." – The Superintendent Survival Guide[2]

We live in a time when public trust in government, academia, education and just about every other societal institution is at an all-time low. As of 2013, just 22 percent of people reported having a "great deal of confidence" in public school leaders.[3]

So, whether you're coming into a district with an entrenched culture of mistrust, looking to rebuild broken relationships due to a breach of trust by the previous leadership, or simply laying the groundwork of confidence in your new leadership, building trust is an essential component for success in your role.

Through our work with districts across the nation, we've learned that building trust requires an open, two-way discourse that results in letting people know they've been heard.

As Dr. Vannasdall explains:

> *We make lots of decisions for parents who trust us with their children, their most prized possessions. If you don't build that trust, then they're not going to follow you when you make those big decisions. How do you build trust? You have to listen to people. You engage with them. You have to ask them questions and they have to know you care about what they're saying; that you're listening to it; that you're reading it; and you're reacting to it.*

Thoughtexchange can help build this kind of trust for a new superintendent through an introductory exchange we call a "Weather Report." A Weather Report generally involves using Thoughtexchange to ask your community a single, open-ended question: "What are some things you think our schools are doing well, and some things we can focus on in order to improve?"

Asking this question, letting people respond confidentially in their own words, and then showing them they've been heard by either acknowledging or acting on their input, is often enough to begin building trust and confidence. And, by doing this, you're not just gathering priorities but also helping the community learn through effective sharing of information about the district.

"Thoughtexchange is just that," says Dr. Vannasdall. "It's an exchange. It's not a survey. You're asking people for their opinion, reflecting on those opinions, collecting those opinions from a lot of different voices and then taking action on them. When the community sees you doing that, they know they're in good hands."

Getting the lay of the land

"Where to begin? You need to know how things are done around here... I recommend school district leaders review and assess the district and school culture, particularly the learning culture. How do we learn about how things get done around here?" — Gene Medina, Retired Superintendent, North Kitsap School District[4]

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[2] http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3758209   [3] The Superintendent's Fieldbook - https://books.google.ca/books?id=PeZ0AwAAQBAJ&source=gbs_similarbooks
[4] The Superintendent's Fieldbook - https://books.google.ca/books?id=PeZ0AwAAQBAJ&source=gbs_similarbooks

While you're working to build or reinforce that trust and confidence by listening to your community, you'll also be expected to learn the lay of the land in your district and quickly chart a path forward. And those can be difficult priorities to balance.

As Dr. Vannasdall notes:

> Coming in as a new superintendent, one of my worst fears was the unknown. I'm not afraid of hard work, but I want to know what I'm faced with. So really understanding the pulse of the community is something I think every superintendent coming into a new position is anxious about. Right away, in my first year, I was very fortunate that we used Thoughtexchange. The first (exchange) was a general one about celebration. What better information and data (are) there to have as a new superintendent than to know what your community celebrates? Because you don't want to stop doing the things your community celebrates. You also want to know what are the things that have been bothering them over the past couple of years. What do they want you, as the new superintendent, to focus on?

Thoughtexchange has the unique capacity to let you do all of the above at the same time. Running an exchange not only helps you build trust and confidence with your community, it can also help you discover the culture, values and priorities of your community—and you can use that data to move forward in your role with confidence.
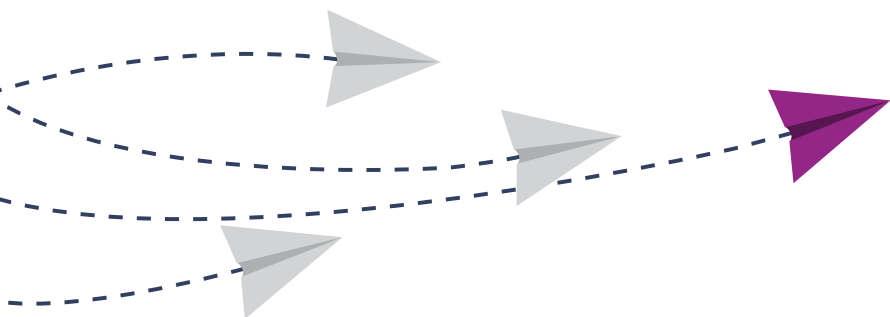
Charting the path forward

"Individuals are most likely to trust and cooperate freely with systems—whether they themselves win or lose by those systems—when fair process is observed."
— The Harvard Business Review[5]

Yes, focus groups and in-person meetings have their place in a new superintendent's role. Some people truly value and feel comfortable speaking their minds through that face-to-face connection. And many others either don't have time to attend those events, or don't feel comfortable making their voices heard in large groups. Thoughtexchange can help engage the silent majority who often don't make it out to those meetings.

As former Superintendent of Iowa's Linn-Mar Community School District, Dr. Quintin Shepherd explains:

> The only way to to identify the priorities is to go out and ask people, "What is it that you care about?" If all you're doing is listening to 25 or 30 people talk about their priorities because they happen to be available on a Thursday night when you're holding the focus group sessions, then those 25 or 30 people get to tell you the direction of the district. If you use the Thoughtexchange tools and focus groups, you've just increased your listening capacity by at least tenfold. I took the in-person process that so many of us have, where I networked with community groups, met with teacher groups and listened to people and asked questions. At the same time, I ran an exchange in the background that asked these big, bold questions: "What is it that we do well, and what are some of the things we can improve on?" We were in multiple formats, which I think was really good for people.

Combining what you learn from in-person engagements with the rich data and insights from Thoughtexchange allows you to build a list of priorities for your strategic plan that have a high likelihood of receiving community support.

The key to increasing your chances of support is making sure people know they have been heard. One way to do that is to share the top thoughts along with your responses—which you can do in just minutes using Thoughtexchange's instant reporting functionality. Perhaps more importantly, people need to see their input reflected in the plan. Or, if not, they know it was received and hear the reasons why you can't currently act on their feedback.

"We literally captured the voice of our community with over 150,000 discrete points of impact used in writing our strategic plan," says Dr. Shepherd. "We captured the phrases people used and built that into our plan. So someone could log in and be the one to say, 'I said that. That's actually in the strategic plan. They're actually going to do this over the next 10 years.'"

A paper published by the Harvard Business Review called "Fair Process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy" shows how leaders managing major changes only found success by involving people in the decision-making process and letting them know they were heard. From this paper, we've learned that when leaders use a fair process, even people who don't benefit from a decision are more likely to support it simply because they were involved in the process. Ultimately, people are more inclined to listen once they've been heard.

Doing all of the above helps create that fair process: in which community members are involved in the decisions that affect them, develop trust in leadership and are thus more likely to support the plan for moving forward— because they helped create it.

> *We literally captured the voice of our community with over 150,000 discrete points of impact used in writing our strategic plan.*
>
> **Dr. Quintin Shepherd, Superintendent**

"Even if you have a good process like Thoughtexchange that's increasing participation and giving people a voice on issues that really matter to them, if you don't circle back afterwards you've undone all the good that you tried to do," explains Catherine Carbone Rogers, Chief Communications Officer at Highline Public Schools, WA.
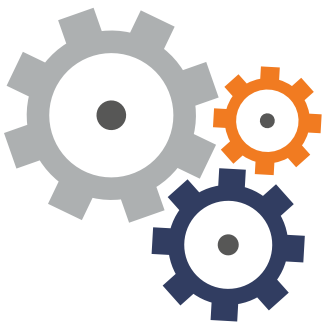
Making it happen

"Being a superintendent means balancing intense and often competing pressures. There are political minefields to navigate and harsh financial realities to contend with. In the current educational climate, chief administrators are expected to implement vast curriculum changes to adhere to Common Core standards and to revamp controversial teacher evaluation systems. Meanwhile, they have less control at the local level and fewer funds than ever before." – The Superintendent's Survival Guide[6]

Some might say it would be wise for every new superintendent to take juggling lessons. While you're getting to know your community and building a strategic plan, you also need to build relationships with your team. Add to that the need to learn what resources you have available to execute on the priorities of your new plan, and you've got a lot of balls in the air.

[6] http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3758209

One way to check off all these boxes at the same time is to leverage the knowledge and expertise of your staff to discover what resources are available and together create a set of strategies or approaches for achieving the objectives set out in your strategic plan.

Again, Thoughtexchange lets you ask a single, open-ended question to quickly engage with your team to learn what's important to them and let them freely share knowledge about what works well and what doesn't.

As Dr. Shepherd notes:

> *The last step, where we so often fall short in school administration is to identify processes. What process can you use to go after those priorities with the resources you have at your disposal? It's another opportunity to use Thoughtexchange to ask, "What ideas do you have for how to better improve process for a specific reading intervention, or professional development?" or any question you want to ask?" So, there are multiple engagement points to use Thoughtexchange to help improve the capacity of the district.*

Thoughtexchange lets you quickly and confidentially reach out and gather your team's collective wisdom, and let them create a prioritized list of the most important points. That list can then be used at a meeting, training session or other event to help make it more efficient and productive.

A note on vulnerability

"The signs of authentic engagement: The community is not seen as the problem but as a partner in defining the problem. Communication is a two-way street. Based on listening and dialogue, communication attempts to clarify challenges and build solutions. Engagement is early and often, not late and cursory. The bias is toward inclusion of as many people as possible. The idea is to go beyond the usual suspects to create the conditions for constructive change. But engagement is hard to do well. It has to deal with mistrust and cynicism, bad experiences, and lack of understanding among stakeholders, on one hand, and educators' resistance to open up the discussion on the other." — Will Friedman, President, Public Agenda Foundation[7]

Many leaders who are new to Thoughtexchange express some level of fear when they first consider the idea of asking their community an open-ended question, letting people respond in their own words and committing to publicly addressing the thoughts shared. They're concerned that such a level of transparency could create a situation where criticism and complaints overwhelm any benefit that might come out of an exchange.

What we have learned from helping hundreds of districts address some of the most challenging issues public education leaders can face, is that starting an open conversation and being vulnerable in this way almost always results in a constructive, positive experience.

When you structure your exchange in such a way that it asks about your community's appreciations and concerns,

[7] The Superintendent's Fieldbook - https://books.google.ca/books?id=PeZ0AwAAQBAJ&source=gbs_similarbooks

you will get to see the range of opinions in your community in the context of their values. The loud voices that often dominate your office or public meetings are put into perspective by seeing how many other people actually agree with those points of view. In this way, you also get to see sometimes how small an extremely vocal special interest group might actually be.

And Thoughtexchange also creates the potential for empathy by allowing people to consider different perspectives alongside their own as they assign stars in the Star step.

Finally, because Thoughtexchange offers options for both AI-moderated exchanges and custom moderation by your team, any thoughts that could be considered hurtful, rude or targeted at an individual can be reviewed and removed before being shared with the public. This function is essential for making sure your community's conversation stays productive and inclusive.

Conclusion

When it comes to community engagement, there's no single solution for public education leaders. It's really a puzzle and every piece has its place. You still need to have public meetings, establish committees, send out press releases and so on.

Integrating Thoughtexchange into your toolkit can be the key piece that brings all the others together to make them more productive and efficient. That's because Thoughtexchange lets you engage more people in a two-way discussion that allows both you and your community to learn what matters most to everyone. Having that knowledge can make your in-person engagement efforts more productive, because you can talk together about common interests instead of biased positions.

Bringing people together for a community crowdsourcing conversation with Thoughtexchange, learning what matters and using that information to create interest-based face-to-face engagements, paves the way for a strong relationship with your community. That trust, combined with actionable data from your exchange, provides the roadmap you need to lead the way forward with confidence.

Hear more from our customers

As you can probably tell from the quotes peppered throughout this paper, we like to share our customers' stories in their own words whenever possible. With that in mind, we'll conclude with a quote from Dr. Quintin Shepherd.

We can say to the community, "Not only did we hear you, not only did we respond to you and build a strategic plan around this, but you can literally find your own language in here to show the work that we're doing." Thoughtexchange has allowed us to be truly responsive to our community. We're not just going to ask them for feedback, we're going to move on it, or not, and have a reason why. It has allowed us to make manifest the promises we've made.

[Watch the video](#)