Building trust through listening

A white paper by K12 *Insight*

3 steps to strengthen connections with parents, teachers, staff, and other school district stakeholders

Most school districts do an excellent job of communicating outbound messages to their stakeholders. Yet the other side – listening – is a much greater challenge.
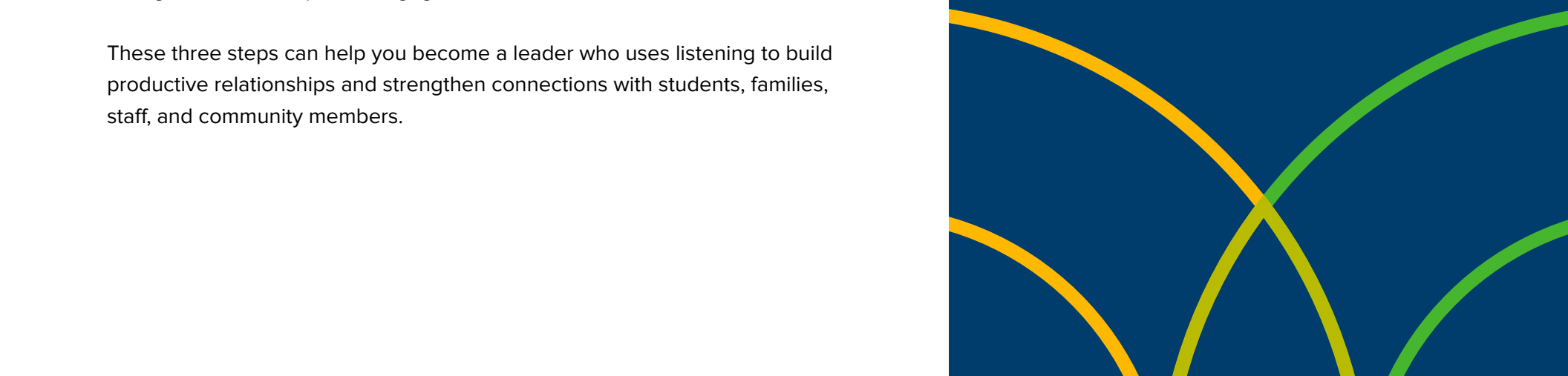
Listening builds trust, engages families, and helps district leadership make informed decisions.

However, a 2018 Gallup study found only 20% of families feel engaged in their student's education – and nearly three academic years of pandemic-related changes have made parent engagement more difficult.

These three steps can help you become a leader who uses listening to build productive relationships and strengthen connections with students, families, staff, and community members.

Better family engagement leads to better educational outcomes

A study from the Harvard Family Research Project reported "schools would need to increase per-pupil spending by more than $1,000 in order to achieve the same results that are gained with parental involvement."

1. Engage and empower stakeholders

The most successful school district leaders know every interaction with stakeholders is an opportunity to listen and learn about where your district is succeeding and what needs aren't being met.

For some districts, listening is only happening at a high level as staff read comments on social media, check emails as often as possible, and attempt to route phone calls to the right departments. And with acute staffing challenges, it's hard to find the time to intentionally listen and respond to feedback from every parent, guardian, student, and staff member. Incoming messages easily pile up, overwhelming you and your staff and keeping frustrated stakeholders waiting for a response.

Engaging and empowering stakeholders is foundational to a superior customer experience, which is more important than ever — especially as districts face staffing attrition and options for families have expanded through school choice programs, charter schools, and virtual schools.

Listening is a great first step, but solid community connections need more than a one-way conversation. Stakeholders need to feel heard and understood.

To engage and empower stakeholders in your school district, provide them with a clear, simple way to provide feedback and ask questions anytime. Then, set standards in your district for quickly, efficiently, and consistently acknowledging feedback and addressing concerns within days or even hours.

By effectively engaging and empowering all district stakeholders, you can build trust and strengthen connections — which in turn will foster a positive school environment and support enrollment and retention.

Download our Listening Tour Toolkit

Ready to take the next step in engaging and empowering your school district community? Our Listening Tour Toolkit offers a step-by-step plan for launching a successful listening tour that engages teachers and staff, families and students, and other stakeholders.

Download Now

2. Demonstrate your commitment to transparency

Transparency is an essential component of trust. You can't create a thriving school culture and climate — inside and out — without clear, open communication and delivering on your promises.

Start by setting clear expectations within your district on your commitment to communication and engagement. How can people provide feedback? What happens when they voice their concerns? How quickly should they expect a response?

Acting on feedback from stakeholders shows accountability and builds confidence in district leadership. Provide consistent, clear communications about how feedback has impacted your district's decisions — especially if changes will impact students and teachers.

For employees, transparency builds trust and helps people feel more engaged and committed to the district's vision and mission. It can help retain employees, especially as many districts face high teacher turnover following the pandemic.

By promoting transparency and accountability, stakeholders will feel their voices matter — supporting school success and building trust capital.

People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.
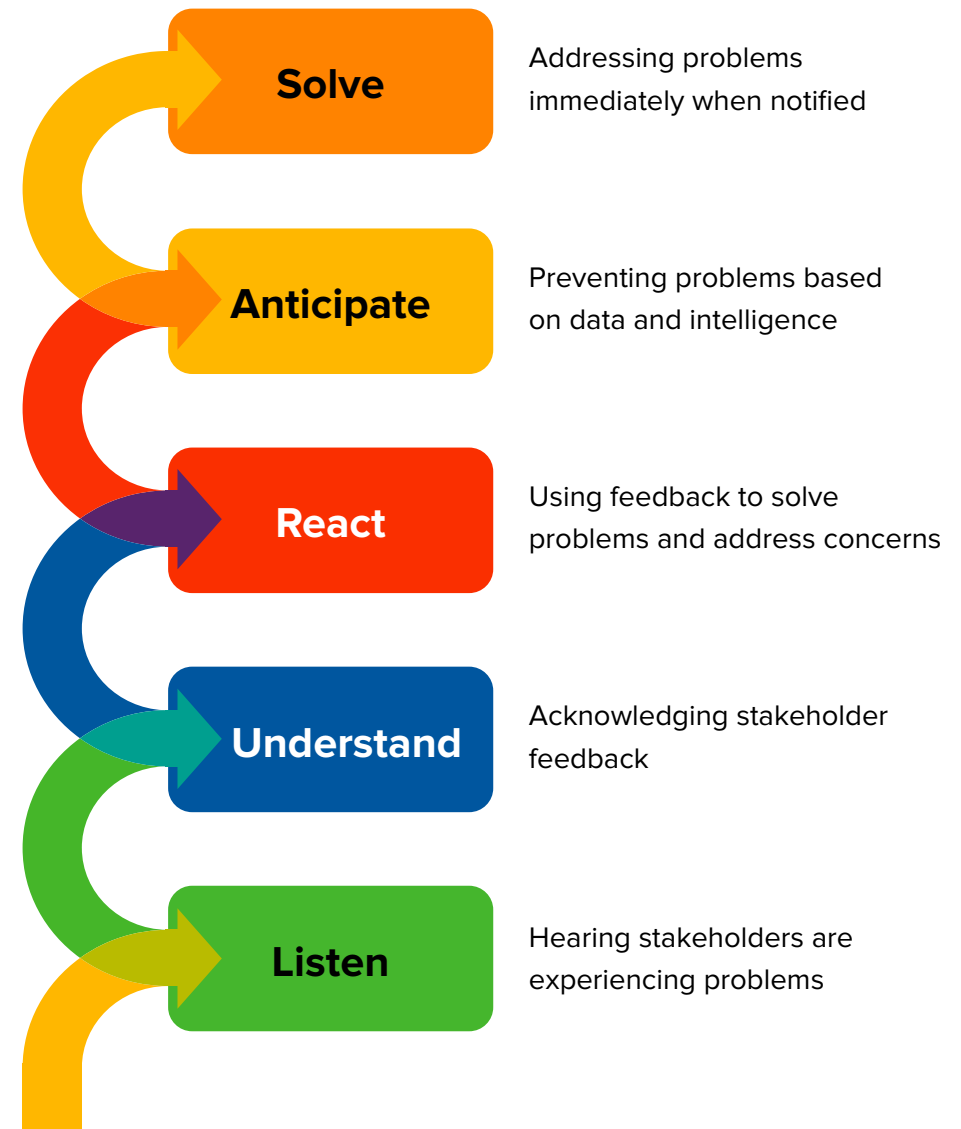
— Maya Angelou

3. Anticipate stakeholder needs – then act

In the age of Amazon-level customer care, stakeholders have high expectations — and a lot of other options if those expectations aren't met. Anticipating your stakeholders' needs and exceeding their expectations will help you continue to build trust and strengthen connections that will reduce staff and student churn, improve equity and access, and increase productivity and morale.

You can't report or improve what you don't measure. And you can't break the cycle of being reactive without impactful insights.

Use the data and insights you collect when engaging with families and other stakeholder groups to plan ahead. Proactive, data-driven decisions will help you solve existing problems while preventing new issues — all the while proving your commitment to maintaining trust in your district.

Anticipating needs can also prevent "fire drills" in which your staff have to drop everything to address the concerns of upset parents. Fewer fire drills mean more time for staff to focus more on what matters most: student success.

Solve
Addressing problems immediately when notified

Anticipate
Preventing problems based on data and intelligence

React
Using feedback to solve problems and address concerns

Understand
Acknowledging stakeholder feedback

Listen
Hearing stakeholders are experiencing problems

6 Steps to Supporting Stakeholders to Build Trust

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Better experiences.
Better engagement.
Better education.

K12 *Insight* delivers the only customer experience and intelligence platform purpose-built for education.

We help district leaders strengthen trust and deliver superior customer experiences by:

- Supporting district-wide goals for better communication, collaboration, transparency, equity, and engagement
- Streamlining all inbound communications in one, district-wide unified inbox
- Revealing needs and trends in real time so you can make proactive decisions for your departments and district

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