

# The Essential K-12 Community Engagement Tool Kit



# Table of Contents

Students thrive in engaged communities	4
Building trust is essential to passing bonds	5
Sharing the what, why, and how with a better community engagement plan	6
Listen, Learn, Return: Broadening engagement and building alignment at CUSD 303	8
Engage your community with ThoughtExchange	10



# The Essential K-12 Community Engagement Tool Kit



Building community trust is essential as school districts navigate polarization, legislation, and budget cuts. The insights and experiences of your educational partners—teachers, students, parents, staff, and community members—are a powerful resource for successful initiatives.

Gathering and analyzing community data efficiently and effectively is crucial. This K-12 community engagement tool kit explores building trust with educational partners, developing a better engagement plan, and exciting developments in the engagement software space.

Read on for innovative tactics and strategies to ensure your community engagement initiatives contribute to your district's ultimate goal of student success.



# Students thrive in engaged communities

Schools play an integral role in every community—and communities need to support optimal learning environments to ensure happy, healthy, and successful students.

Community engagement in schools can increase access to learning, boost student retention, promote optimism among teachers, and improve attendance rates.

While families and community partners often donate their time and resources, it's up to schools and their districts to promote [community engagement](#). Below, explore the importance of community engagement in schools and get tips to succeed.

## How to promote community engagement in schools

Fostering involvement while building and sustaining community engagement in schools is challenging. Educators, families, and community partners often disagree about how to achieve the best outcomes.

To enhance your community's participation, promote an environment where they feel respected, trusted, and heard.

Here are some ways to do that:

1. Involve both formal and informal community groups
2. Build community awareness campaigns
3. Use the school as a community hub

## Palenque LSNA transformed schools into community activity hubs to help students prosper

Palenque LSNA realized the local public schools in the Logan Square neighborhood—comprised of 90% Latinx and 95% low-income students—were key to improving economic conditions and connecting and strengthening the community.

In the 1990s, they formed an education committee organizing families, teachers, and principals to relieve overcrowding. Together, they opened five elementary school annexes and two new middle schools.

They also created a [parent mentor program](#) that trains mothers, mainly immigrants, as paid classroom assistants while providing leadership development training and a welcoming community. The program has since spread to seven other schools, graduating more than 1,300 parents.

## Tap into your school community's potential

Town hall meetings, surveys, and focus groups don't always capture a community's diverse perspectives. Engagement and survey platforms like ThoughtExchange provide a safe and convenient way to share and learn from others. Schools get the tools to increase engagement, make more informed decisions, increase public trust and confidence, and improve learning outcomes.

Read on to see how one of our customers used ThoughtExchange to build trust with their district.



## Building trust is essential to passing bonds

Building trust with your community is critical to addressing challenges and creating strategies for positive change.

In [this episode of SchoolPR Drive Time](#), ThoughtExchange Account Manager Kailey Metcalfe, Highline Public Schools' Chief Communication Officer Catherine Carbone Rogers, and Assistant Director of Communication Tove Tupper explore the challenges, opportunities, and strategies that arise when engaging parents, staff, and educational partners.

### Trust helps Highline pass a stubborn bond

Washington state's Highline Public Schools were overcrowded and had derelict buildings. Leaders were confident they could rectify the situation with a bond until **they lost the referendum by 200 votes**. A second loss confirmed they needed a new strategy.

An Exchange revealed that the community opposed how staff had allocated amounts for bond package items—not the items themselves. The community didn't trust the school district to make these decisions.

Knowing this, leaders developed a solution to rebuild trust, creating a Citizen Advisory Committee to lead the charge. The resulting bond passed with 67% of the vote.

Carbone Rogers says, **“Trust is the currency of a superintendent, school district, and especially a school PR practitioner.** You cannot reach your goals as a school district if you don't have the trust of the community because your efforts will be blocked at every opportunity. If you have trust, you'll be able to pursue the goals and vision you have for your schools.”

So, how did Highline build trust to mitigate challenges? They started by listening to their community to understand where they were coming from. When people feel heard and involved in decision-making, they're more likely to support, not sabotage a strategy or decision.

[Learn More](#)

**A robust community engagement plan can help. Learn how below.**





# Sharing the what, why, and how with a better community engagement plan

Addressing critical district issues like school safety, [curriculum](#) or policy changes, and [culture building](#) is part of your job. A robust community engagement plan is essential to succeed. Here's how to create one.

## What is a community engagement plan?

A [community engagement plan](#) outlines outreach and public participation activities, including assigned roles and timelines for new or reoccurring projects impacting the community.

Where your [community engagement strategy](#) explains why your district will need specific resources and will take specific actions, your plan will outline the steps to achieve the strategy. Consider your project's purpose and objectives, conduct a community analysis, decide on engagement methods, and work through potential risks and challenges.

## Creating a better community engagement plan

An [engaged community](#) has many benefits, creating increased trust, buy-in, and ownership while empowering superintendents to make more effective decisions. Whatever issue you're addressing, you'll need your community's input to succeed. While they'll help define your plan's objectives and purpose by telling you what

they want and need, they'll also determine its success by providing support throughout the process.

### 8 things to include in your community engagement plan

Although community engagement plans will vary based on the project, consider adding these [key components](#) to yours:

1. Project background info and historical context
2. Defined purpose and objectives
3. Community analysis
4. Engagement methods
5. Key messages and communication strategy
6. Risks, challenges, and solutions
7. Feedback collection and integration
8. Evaluation

An easy-to-use [engagement and survey platform](#) can increase community participation over standard methods.

Ensure it includes [multilingual capabilities](#) and is accessible on any device, anytime. The ability to reflect on each other's input is also key to [mitigating bias](#).

This will allow you to capture more voices and create more inclusive, equitable conversations.



## Springfield Public Schools gets unbiased community insights

**Dr. Grenita Lathan**, Superintendent at Springfield Public Schools (SPS), Springfield, MO, uses ThoughtExchange to get authentic, unbiased community insights to optimize her strategic plan.

She says, “The return for us is in our participation rate, the ease of using the platform, and in making sure our people understand that ThoughtExchange is one of our primary tools for gathering feedback and information.”

“ It’s so easy to take the data and immediately utilize it. [Using ThoughtExchange shows] we’re partners with our parents and our community.

**DR. GRENITA LATHAN,**  
**Superintendent at Springfield Public Schools**

Tap into your community’s insights to create effective community engagement plans and solve your district’s most pressing issues. Ask your community the right questions, and they’ll give you the answers you need to succeed.

[Learn More](#)



## LISTEN, LEARN, RETURN

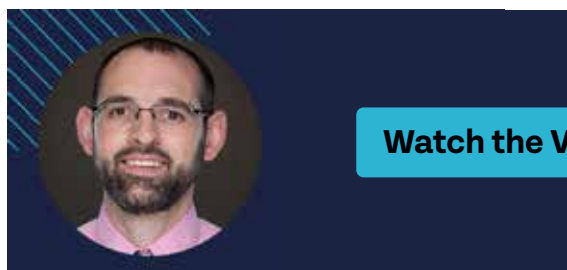
# Broadening engagement and building alignment at CUSD 303

Scott Harvey joined Community Unit School District 303 as Chief Communications Officer the same month Dr. Paul Gordon became superintendent.

He and Dr. Gordon developed a community engagement plan called **Listen Learn Return** to support a successful school year and build trust in leadership. They asked staff, students, parents, and community members three questions to understand how the community felt about the district and provide an opportunity to participate in decision-making:

- What are the challenges facing the district?
- What are the opportunities for growth?
- What are you most proud of in the district?

Harvey explains. “We serve a large district of about 12,000 students and 1,800 staff members. It can be difficult to always hear everyone’s perspective when you serve that many people. The process wasn’t just about listening, learning, and eventually returning with some action steps—it was about engaging with each other within our community to find solutions that best serve our students.”



[Watch the Video](#)

## Scaling community engagement

During in-person sessions, participants anonymously wrote their thoughts and ideas on Post-It notes for others to read and discuss. After, Harvey’s team gathered the notes to transcribe and analyze.

ThoughtExchange provides a digital solution for scaling community conversations. Exchanges allowed them to keep the open and thoughtful dialogue they needed to address some of the district’s challenges, opportunities for growth, and points of pride for the community—on a much bigger scale.

## Gathering faster feedback

The smaller in-person sessions provided a data set to work with. Harvey leveraged our robust Exchange set-up tools to ensure he made the most of his team’s accomplishments, choosing 4 themes from the in-person sessions and plugging them into Exchanges.

## Features for better engagement

Facilitating open communication is challenging, whether it’s due to a lack of connection or participants feeling uncomfortable sharing their real concerns. Features that mitigate bias to ensure equity and those that allow leaders to moderate to keep conversations respectful and productive are key.



## Data analysis made quick and simple

Education leaders must be prepared to hear, understand, and address their community's answers. Without ThoughtExchange, data analysis can take weeks—if not months—of dedicated effort to organize, interpret, and share back.



### Speed

"ThoughtExchange allows you to receive that data instantaneously. We could easily generate and fine-tune the themes based on some keywords that came in through the Exchange. It saved us weeks worth of work."



### Heatmaps

"[The Heatmaps] provide a visual summary of how themes resonated with different demographics. So we're not just looking at our audience as a whole, but pinpointing what grade level, gender, or school they're affiliated with."



### Reporting

"It was important that we weren't just sitting on the data for a while, but that we were coming back quickly to say, here's what we learned, here's how we're going to make changes, or here's why we will continue to do things in certain ways. Community engagement is only as good as the transparency that you provide."

School districts recognize that parents and community members expect more digital engagement solutions. With ThoughtExchange, Harvey and his team could scale their in-person engagement initiative while maintaining critical open dialogue.

[Read the Full Story](#)



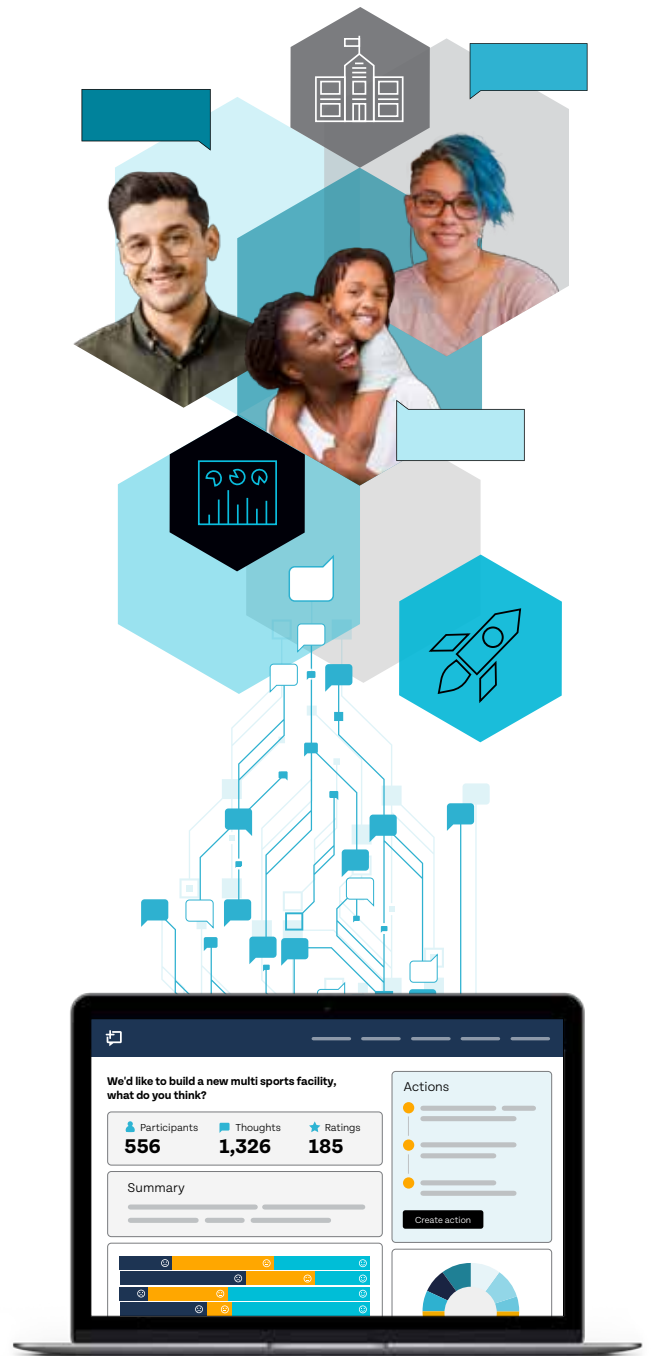
# Engage your community with ThoughtExchange

As an education leader, you make crucial decisions daily. You need to build trust, save on costs, allocate resources, and drive success for every learner. Involving your staff and community ensures you have the information you need to make the right decisions at the right time.

With ThoughtExchange, collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Plus, get built-in AI data analysis tools to identify actionable insights—all in one platform. Pinpoint concrete actions, and your community can see their ideas come to life, increasing support and satisfaction in your district.

“The smartest person in the room—is the room. And you need a way to get the feedback that allows you to leverage the knowledge in the room. The tool to do that is ThoughtExchange.”

**KEVIN CASE**, Superintendent, Douglas School District 51-1



Through working with K-12 education leaders nationwide, we've seen how better engagement and better data transform student success. With a customer base representing thousands of educational leaders and nearly 40 million students across North America, we keep our finger on the pulse of education—and we're invested in your district's success.

*ThoughtExchange gets you deeper insights, faster results, and an ahead-of-the-curve community engagement experience—all in one platform.*



**Want to learn more about how ThoughtExchange can help you engage your community?**

[WATCH THE PRODUCT TOUR](#)

 [ThoughtExchange.com](https://ThoughtExchange.com)