



WHY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS MUST ADDRESS EXISTING INEQUALITIES

By Sean Arseo, University of California, Davis

The issues of family and community engagement and local control are often at the heart of debates about education policies and school reform. This makes sense, since research shows that [students, communities, teachers, and administrators](#) often benefit when education professionals, families, and community members collaboratively identify shared educational goals that support student success.

However, research also shows that some community members – most notably privileged parents – have the resources and time needed to more fully engage with local school districts, leading to some [intentionally](#) and [unintentionally](#) leveraging their networks to promote policies that hoard resources and opportunities for their children. This means that community engagement efforts often leave out the voices of minority and disadvantaged community members, further widening the inequalities plaguing the nation's schools. For community engagement efforts to be established and expanded thoughtfully, school districts must enact policies that allow for more flexibility, support, and opportunities for all community members.

CALIFORNIA'S COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICIES

In 2013, California's school funding overhaul produced the Local Control Funding Formula – called LCFF for short. LCFF made school districts the primary financial decision-makers. Each year after LCFF was enacted, local district administrators and elected school board members were required to consider family and community input in education priorities and budget decisions, thus creating opportunities for partnerships.

Early impact assessments of this policy show mixed results. At most, one-in-three parents of school-aged children reported hearing about LCFF and less than 20% of those who did hear about it said they participated in their district's planning. Studies of the rollout indicated that in many school districts ["the loudest voices"](#) among participating parents predominantly advocated for students in advanced or gifted classes rather than advocating for all or historically underperforming children. This disparity stems, in part, from the fact that many districts used pre-existing committees and other channels where active parents (which often means privileged parents) were already participating.

Some districts with long histories of community engagement partnered with community-based organizations and other [external stakeholders](#). These districts tended to be more cognizant of the need to include historically marginalized voices during the first year of implementation. However, most district leaders continue to [report challenges](#) gathering input from all stakeholders, especially from communities targeted for empowerment like parents and guardians of low-income students, English language learners, and homeless and foster youth. The result was that the parents of the most privileged students were overrepresented, while disadvantaged students continued their schooling with limited support or advocacy efforts.

LEARNING FROM KINGDOM UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

To better understand and identify these challenges, I conducted a longitudinal case study at a large, diverse, and high-needs urban school district in Northern California – Kingdom Unified School District¹. I found that extensive time commitments were a primary barrier to parent and community participation in school governance activities. I also find that these barriers were not experienced equally among parents in the district.

LCFF requires school districts to establish a Parent Advisory Committee and English Learner Advisory Committee to ensure a consistent source for parent and community feedback. Over time, however, many resource-strapped districts come to rely on these committees as their only or predominant source for feedback from community members.

At Kingdom Unified, school board members ask interested parents and community members in their local area to apply to the committee. The participating parents, working to propose priorities, actions, and metrics to support student achievement, were ones with the time to attend monthly meetings and serve year-long terms. As such, districts like Kingdom Unified that rely on these committees for all of their community engagement will likely not receive much meaningful input from underserved groups.

Because committee members only met monthly, discussions were often vibrant and enthusiastic. This enthusiasm also meant meetings often went over schedule. While some committee members (e.g. retirees without school-aged children) welcomed these extensions, some participants (like working parents) emphasized the burdens additional time placed on them. Even though the district provided free childcare during meetings, this service ended at meetings' scheduled closes. Nighttime meetings, ostensibly intended to accommodate working parents' schedules, may have actually intensified the burdens they felt.

WAYS FORWARD

Sweeping economic reforms that offer parents and other community members shorter workdays and higher wages are likely needed to address the disparities in community engagement. However, even without those changes, school district staff and state agency administrators could help level some of the barriers that prevent under-served community members from participating in school governance activities.

School districts should consider:

- Using multiple methods to solicit feedback from parents and other community members.
- Creating a robust survey that stakeholders can answer from the comfort of their homes.
- Recruiting and training Community Ambassadors who can help other community members fill out the survey and bring those people to meetings.
- Providing several town hall-style community meetings for parents that want to engage but may not be able to commit to committee membership.
- Developing a process through which staff can present proposals (identified via town halls or the survey) to committees on which highly engaged parents and community members sit.

Read more at Sean Arseo, *School (Districts) of Democracy: Institutional Stakeholder Engagement under California's Local Control Funding Formula*, (Forthcoming).

State Department of Education Officials should consider:

- Revising regulatory language or updating guidelines related to the Brown Act to avoid disincentivizing districts from efforts that would engage target populations.
- Highlighting champions of engagement and resourcing them appropriately. Many of the ideas in the list above were practices developed by Kingdom Unified, which were either ended or substantially reduced because of lack of funding, administrative burden, or a shifted focus from soliciting robust feedback to monitoring its implementation.
- Allocating funding to incentivize low-income community engagement. Small stipends for low-income parents or community members interested in committee participation may help boost participation and help address time burdens equitably.

ⁱ Some details, like names, have been changed to protect the confidentiality of research participants.