

Community Engagement Assessment

Engaging the Boulder Valley Community

A REPORT OF FINDINGS

Boulder Valley Board of Education

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• Introduction

Community engagement involves citizens discussing and weighing in on issues important to them. An effective, thoughtful process can result in a common vision and shared responsibility for an issue within a community. At the very least, it allows citizens to better understand the difficult choices confronting policymakers and provide input into those decisions. Policymakers' decisions are often better informed because they are shaped by public input.

Engaging the community is essential to a healthy and thriving public school system. Both the superintendent and Boulder Valley Board of Education recognize this and are committed to strengthening community engagement across the district. As elected representatives from the community, school board members are well-positioned to engage their constituents, which helps ensure their policy decisions reflect the community's values.

The school board asked the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) and Schoolhouse Communications to conduct research about how community engagement efforts were viewed in the Boulder Valley School District (BVSD). Key questions: What's working? What strategies need to be improved? What topics are members of the community eager to discuss and why?

The findings in this report will help shape the board's priorities for community engagement, the development of a long-term community engagement plan and the makeup of a community engagement advisory team.

Community engagement:

- Brings the public's voice back to public education
- Promotes dialogue with the public where all participants are equal
- Builds relationships through two-way communication among multiple stakeholders
- Is not a one-time activity or a quick fix to a problem
- Is not a means by which to "educate" people to a certain point of view
- Requires both courage and will from local leadership

What does community engagement mean to you?

When asked what community engagement means to them, most participants largely described it as a process where the board and district actively seek community feedback in a timely, constructive way and are willing to listen to all sides of an issue. Participants reflect the broader community. Community members are heard and their input is considered before decisions are made.



● Research methods

The findings in this report are based on an in-depth discussion session with the school board and superintendent; six 90-minute focus groups; 12 inquiry interviews; and a review of secondary research, including 2008 poll results that showed 58 percent of those surveyed didn't feel BVSD was particularly connected to its respective community.

Interview subjects and focus group participants were guaranteed that their individual comments would be kept confidential and that only recurring themes would be reported. While quotes are included in this report, none are attributed by name.

Conducted in March, the inquiry interviews provided important perspectives from district and community leaders. The focus groups, completed in April, provided qualitative data from the opinions and experiences of BVSD employees, parents and community members. Participants represented a broad cross section of stakeholder groups from most of the district's nine communities, including internal audiences (teachers, principals, administrators and classified employees) and external audiences (parents, a student, business leaders, higher education representatives, senior citizens and non-profit leaders – including individuals who work with hard-to-reach audiences and Spanish speakers).

The goal of this research is to identify common themes and perceptions that can better inform the work of the superintendent and school board as they strengthen the district's community engagement process.

About focus groups

Focus groups are a form of research often used to provide information on people's thoughts and feelings about an organization, issue or idea. Focus groups can help determine:

- Why people hold certain views and what is important to them
- Areas where information is needed
- Effective ways to deliver information
- How particular demographic groups differ in their opinions
- Public receptiveness to new ideas or changes
- Perceptions that may influence behavior toward an organization

● About CASB and Schoolhouse Communications

The team from CASB and Schoolhouse Communications brings extensive experience in providing community engagement counsel, training, tools and services to school boards, administrators and national education organizations. Team members are nationally recognized community engagement experts. They have presented at state and national conferences, written extensively on the topic, and developed how-to guides on engaging the public for both state and national organizations.



• Major Findings

The findings represent recurring issues raised during the research process. Every focus group and interview comment was considered in preparing this report. Direct quotes were drawn from focus groups and interviews, but were not attributed by name as participants were guaranteed anonymity to ensure a rich, frank discussion.

During conversations about community engagement, it is common for communications-related issues to surface. These issues typically focus on promotion of community engagement activities, how participants are recruited and reporting how community feedback is used in the decision-making process. Communications-related issues are described throughout the findings and are addressed in the recommendations section on page 13.

• Community engagement efforts: What's working

Some interview subjects and focus group participants believed the school board and superintendent are making a concerted effort to communicate more effectively and to be more visible in the community. Several said they have noticed a positive shift — especially to rebuild trust, create greater openness and build stronger lines of communication. “I want them to hear that they are doing a good job in general and that we know they are trying to do an even better job,” said one participant. “And with a few exceptions here or there, they have shown up a lot.” Some focus group participants noted a more open, accessible environment under Superintendent Chris King’s leadership.

““ I want [the superintendent and school board] to hear that they are doing a good job in general and that we know they are trying to do an even better job.””
– participant

Community engagement

Benefits:

- The community will be better informed about major issues and the difficult decisions facing district leadership.
- Community members are heard even though their views may not always be adopted.
- District and board decisions will be better informed.
- The school board will be more secure in its decision-making process and more likely to stick with a decision representing the larger community.

Concerns:

- Community members will think district leadership and the board didn't listen to them if they don't get “what they want.”
- Community engagement will be for show only; decisions will already have been made prior to engaging the community.
- Not enough time and resources will be invested to ensure the process is successful.
- Community engagement may water down some of the district's strategic work for student achievement and send staff in “lots of different directions.”

- interview subjects and focus group participants



Several participants also recognized that balancing the needs and interests of a diverse, highly educated community is challenging work for the superintendent and the school board. “Boulder is a wonderful place, but also a very demanding and righteous community,” said a participant. “It does make it more of a challenge to have successful engagement. In this community if you don’t get what you want — people are quick to blame the process.”

Participants cited several examples of past community engagement activities that they thought were largely successful, including the board’s process to revise its gift policy, determining skills for 21st century graduates, the bond election, selecting the new superintendent and school construction oversight. In particular, the bond election and school construction oversight

engagement process were viewed as well organized and open, and used multiple methods for engagement. An individual who participated in the new superintendent selection process said he never had the sense that it was “a done deal.” Lots of input was gathered, and leadership welcomed tough questions.

Others pointed to the value of serving on districtwide task forces or committees such as the Parent Engagement Network, facilities and marketing. They said they felt listened to and valued — even if their opinion wasn’t always reflected in the final decision. Participating in ongoing conversations about a specific topic also deepened their understanding about the issue and the difficult choices district leaders and board members must weigh. A few participants specifically noted that when board members participate on committees, they feel those board members listened to them.

One participant who has been involved in districtwide committees shared this observation: “What I learned from being in that group — which had very diverse representation — was that everyone wanted the same thing: a good education for kids in our community. It wasn’t ‘my school is better than your school.’ When you take it out of the context of what’s happening to you personally and have to instead work as a group, you develop a larger sense of what will help students improve and learn.”

When asked why certain forums were more effective than others, focus group participants said that leaders outline the non-negotiables upfront and state why they are non-negotiables. “The rules of engagement are critical,” stressed a focus group participant. Many also emphasized that effective community engagement occurs before decisions are made, and they value knowing how their input is used. Many noted that effective engagement also takes place when they meet with board members and district leaders in their local schools or communities.

Other factors for success included specific methods for discussion, such as professionally facilitated conversations, small group discussions and one-on-one conversations. Participants said these opportunities result in richer conversations that foster deeper understanding of different perspectives. For some, these experiences have resulted in improved relationships with the district, including with one small group of vocal citizens: “We meet with Chris King every couple of months. We also try to meet with a board member on occasion. We have felt better about the district — it has changed certain aspects of how it works. I also think this [community engagement] project is a sign that the board is trying to listen more.”

“When you take it out of the context of what’s happening to you personally and have to instead work as a group, you develop a larger sense of what will help students improve and learn.”

– participant



• Community engagement efforts: Areas for improvement

Interview subjects and focus group participants had several recommendations for improving BVSD's community engagement efforts. The recommendations highlighted in this section were common across focus groups and interviews.

Interestingly, much of the feedback underscores best practices in community engagement and affirms early concerns raised by the superintendent and the school board in discussions with CASB and Schoolhouse Communications. The focus groups and interviews provided a valuable opportunity to probe more deeply for issues of concern and to learn just how critical these issues are to the public and employees.

Establish clear expectations from the start.

The superintendent and school board must have a clear vision about why they are engaging the community and what they hope to accomplish. This vision must be communicated widely to the community. They must explain upfront what information they hope to gather from the community, how they will use this information in the decision-making process and when they will report back to participants about how their feedback influenced district decision-making. "You have to be as transparent and deliberate as possible," said a participant.

Key to this work is defining who plays what role in the decision-making process. What is the superintendent's role? How is Dr. King's role different from the school board's role? At what stage in the decision-making process does the community have a say? When are decisions left in the hands of the superintendent and school board? "The community needs to know why [the district] decide[s] what we do — and what role they have," said a participant.

Many pointed out that the district is situated in a highly educated community with a strong sense of ownership of its schools, which further emphasizes the need for a well-considered, fair and balanced community engagement process and a clear, transparent decision-making process. "This is a very demanding community," said one participant. "The board needs to have valid reasons for making a decision, then stick to the decision made. Don't waffle at the last minute."

The superintendent and school board must have a clear vision about why they are engaging the community and what they hope to accomplish. This vision must be communicated widely to the community.

~ Engaging the Boulder Valley Community, 2009

Community engagement in BVSD

Areas for improvement:

- Establish clear expectations from the start.
- Engage us before decisions are made.
- Explain clearly how community input is used.
- Talk with us on our turf.
- Reach beyond the "usual suspects."
- Use multiple methods to engage the community.
- Recognize the unique differences from community to community.
- Invest the time and resources to do it well.



“Sticking with a decision once it’s made” was a common refrain. Some believed that last-minute policy changes have occurred after a small group of vocal opponents challenged the school board. Some said “flip-flops” on decisions do not always reflect the best interests of the broader community and leave staff frustrated. “[Staff members] have a great deal of confidence in the board, but want them to be strong leaders and be confident in their decisions,” said a participant. “We go in one direction, and then there’s backlash and we go in a different direction.”

A few participants also said it would be helpful to have background information about a topic before the community engagement activity so they are better prepared to discuss it. “Information is not made available to the public before conversation,” said a participant. “I don’t want to go to a meeting where I’m talked at. I want to engage.”

The community’s perception of how district leadership and the board deal with sticky issues is also important, participants noted. (See the Columbine Elementary example below.) Some said district leaders need to do a better job of listening to citizens, particularly during controversial issues, whether they agree with them or not. “Don’t ignore someone with an opinion or brush them off,” advised a participant. “Or tell them they are wrong,” added another. “The person’s experience is uniquely his or her own.”

Engage us *before* decisions are made.

This was arguably the most common theme heard in focus groups and interviews, and it is related to the previous finding, but bears extra attention.

““ If there’s no choice in a matter, don’t ask us to comment on it.””
– participant

Several participants described some past public forums as “pro forma.” Even though the public was asked for its input, many believed district leadership had already made a final decision. As a result, individuals felt that their opinions were not valued. “If there’s no choice in a matter, don’t ask us to comment on it,” said one participant.

When the district seeks advice from the community, participants urged district leaders to come to the community early on so that community input can be factored in before a final solution is presented to the school board.

The issue at Columbine Elementary was often used as an example to illustrate this point. For many, the negative effects of Columbine will linger and set back efforts to rebuild trust. “There’s a new term,” said one participant. “Some of our low-performing schools say they feel ‘Columbined.’ Decisions are made without them. Some bridges have been burned by the superintendent and school board because of this issue.”

However, others appreciated that the superintendent met with the school community after it publicly criticized his decision to make teachers reapply for their positions. “Chris put himself out there, and it was pretty painful. But in the end he was shaking hands with people,” said a participant. “People felt they had a legitimate complaint and he answered questions directly, including whether he’d reconsider his decision.” (The superintendent later reversed his decision.)



Other public engagement efforts cited as “needing improvement” by focus group and interview participants include a 2008 calendar survey, school closures, moving Casey, budget forums and the District Accountability Committee (DAC). One participant offered this explanation: “We have an overactive community that has lots to say about lots of things. But the district has a tendency to go through the motions of community outreach without really doing anything. It seems that their process is very arm’s length, and it doesn’t feel like they really want our input.”

Others recognized that there are times when the superintendent and the school board must move forward with decisions and they encouraged them to make the tough decisions with one important caveat: “Just be sure to explain clearly to the community why you made the decision you did.”

Knowing when and on what issues to engage the community is critical. Overall, participants viewed community engagement as an effective way to discuss issues *before* they become a “hot button issue.” For example, some focus group participants pointed to the future budget challenges the district will face when Referendum C and Amendment 23 end in 2010. Discussing more complex issues of communitywide interest early gives parents, students, employees and community members more time to digest information, share their views and process different solutions.

Explain clearly how community input is used.

Effective community engagement requires leaders who trust the public and can communicate how the public’s input will be used in the decision-making process. Lack of these “feedback loops” was voiced in most focus groups and interviews. Inadequate feedback loops leave the public uninformed about critical next steps or the reasoning behind a decision.

Left unaddressed, they can breed mistrust, misinformation and lack of interest. “I don’t know if the community feels that it has been listened to or knows how its input has been used. People won’t come to the meeting because they don’t think it’s worth it.” said one participant. “Even if the decision is contrary to what you heard from the community, provide rationale,” advised another participant.

“Even if the decision is contrary to what you heard from the community, provide rationale.”
– participant

Talk with us on our turf.

Another common theme in focus groups and interviews was to take community engagement sessions directly to the communities that the district serves. Board members were encouraged to hold conversations and regular listening sessions at local schools. Some suggested using existing opportunities such as PTA and School Improvement Committee meetings.

Similarly, some staff members said they would like to see board members and the superintendent in their schools more often for dialogue. Some who experienced this firsthand spoke highly of the opportunity to share their views. “The superintendent listened to our concerns one-on-one and then he came to our school and said, ‘What do you need?’” Individuals said they appreciated the “face time” with the superintendent and felt heard.



While many recommended that the superintendent and board members hold school board and public engagement meetings in the district's multiple communities, some acknowledged the extra burden it places on leaders. "The district is pretty widely spanned as far as going to Nederland to Broomfield," said a participant. "But the school board needs to be more mobile in terms of holding their meetings in places other than 6500 Arapahoe." Some suggested that this approach would help counter the perception among some that the board "operates behind closed doors" too much.

In addition, the school board was urged by many participants to attend less high-profile events to chat informally with parents and community members. These events might include showing up on the soccer field sidelines on a Saturday morning or at a school play or a major community event. They said this approach may work especially well in the mountain areas of the district, in Broomfield or in parts of the community where residents are not typically involved with district activities.

One community leader shared this related example: "We had a...meeting right after Mass in a parish that's heavily Latino to ensure we heard their voice. It's important to meet at times and locations that are comfortable and less threatening for those you want to engage. It worked well. The room was packed — even though there was a big football game playoff that same day."

Reach beyond the "usual suspects."

Several focus group participants and interview subjects expressed concern that only people with "an axe to grind" show up at board meetings and public forums. The result is that the board hears from the "vocal minority" rather than from the broader community. The consequence, they say, is that the larger good of the district is not served well by narrow interests. "A couple of recent decisions by the school board seemed like they were based on just one set of stakeholders and it was not really a collaborative process," observed one participant. "That leaves the perception that the board bows to special interests."

“What about the voices who don't even think about being engaged?”
— participant

District leadership was urged to develop strategies that focus on engaging as many members of the broader community as possible. Participants suggested extra effort to engage non-parent taxpayers, the Latino community, less-involved parents, students and staff. "What about the voices who don't even think about being engaged?" asked a participant.

Others focused on reaching out to the Boulder Valley community that does not have children under 18 in the household — more than 70 percent — by better communicating what's in it for them so they are more likely to want to engage with the district: "What happens when you don't pay attention to your schools and education? What ripple effect does that have throughout our community? Try to show people that if our schools are good, we'll recruit businesses and people will want to live here and raise their kids here."

Several participants also cautioned against lumping a community into one category, noting that there are often "subpopulations" within a given constituency. "There is a perception that the board doesn't



always know that people claiming to represent a group do not really represent anyone but themselves,” said a participant.

Reaching out to both the broader community as well as underserved populations involves addressing barriers to participation. Barriers might include socioeconomic issues, cultural differences, legal status and work schedules. “People’s jobs prevent them from participating in evening meetings, or they have a legitimate fear of schools,” explained a participant. That’s where other avenues of community engagement might pay off. “When you want to bring people together, do it around an activity such as food or an event like sports.”

Use multiple methods to engage the community.

When focus groups and interview subjects were asked to describe the types of community engagement activities they have participated in, the most common examples were school board meetings and auditorium-style forums.

Participants urged board members and the superintendent to create more one-on-one and informal opportunities for conversation (as noted earlier). One participant shared this example: “The mayor of Louisville hosts regularly scheduled coffees. During these sessions, people know they can speak informally with the mayor.”

For many, these one-on-one conversations or small group meetings are more comfortable than a packed town hall meeting. Some said they also help build familiarity between the community member and decision-maker over time that can result in greater trust and openness.

Suggested methods for engaging the community ranged widely and some ideas have been noted earlier such as taking monthly school board meetings to local communities. Others encouraged creative uses of technology to engage individuals who may not be able to attend scheduled conversations such as Facebook postings and blogging. Still others suggested it was worth reaching out to groups, such as community service organizations, and piggybacking on to their existing meetings to get input from different stakeholder groups.

Some said the district and school board should use existing venues more effectively, such as the DAC. One individual pointed out that the board should be fully aware of the work of all district committees and determine how that committee work could inform the board’s work.

An important footnote about the DAC: There was a perception among some that administration has taken more “control” by providing agenda items that they want the DAC to tackle, while the DAC doesn’t feel these issues are the most important ones. This left some believing that the administration no longer wants to hear about issues of concern to DAC. It’s hard to say how widespread this sentiment is among DAC members and it warrants further conversation with the DAC. This feedback, however, touches on the larger issue noted earlier of identifying which topics and decisions are administrative, and whether there is opportunity for community feedback on those administrative issues.



Several individuals also spoke about public comment sessions during school board meetings. It is important to note that the concerns they expressed are common to other school boards, and that a public comment session is not recommended as an engagement tool. However, some participants were troubled that board members do not respond to individuals who speak during public comment. One focus group participant described it this way: “A person will talk to the board and spill their guts or provide misinformation, but the board does not respond to it and will go on to a totally different issue. You can imagine how surreal it is. It can come across as arrogant or that they are not listening.” Other concerns: Issues are wide-ranging with little time to explore in-depth; the board is viewed as too businesslike by some observers; and speakers sometimes purport to represent a group of people when in reality they do not. Again, this warrants clarification with the community about the purpose of and norms during board meeting public comment sessions.

Recognize the unique differences from community to community.

Since no two communities are alike, how the superintendent and school board engage the community may look different from place to place. Approaches must vary to meet the needs of citizens from different communities, backgrounds and cultures. BVSD serves nine communities, which requires extra attention to the fact that different communities have different “personalities.” They have their own unique characteristics, gathering places and ways of operating.

For example, several participants pointed out that Broomfield and the mountain communities operate as small towns as opposed to Boulder and its other suburbs. In some communities, people are more “high tech” and rely on e-mail for communicating; in others, they would be offended if leaders did not talk to them face to face.

Whether the method was electronic or face to face, most participants cited “word-of-mouth” with friends and neighbors as their primary information source. Some cited specific places where people gather and talk such as community centers and coffee shops; others named less-specific places such as church or the soccer field. This points to the need for board members to be knowledgeable about and visible in the communities they represent, informally as well as formally.

Invest the time and resources to do it well.

An effective community engagement program takes time and resources, advised some participants: “This is a lot of work. If it’s not successful, it will be demoralizing. The school board has tried this before and it just goes to show how tough it is to take hold.” Others urged the school board to keep an open mind as it moves forward with improved community engagement practices. Model best practices, learn from past mistakes, and avoid falling back into old patterns.

“This is a lot of work. If it’s not successful, it will be demoralizing.”
– participant



• **Community engagement discussion topics**

During interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to identify issues most appropriate for community engagement, recognizing that the school board cannot take every issue to the community for discussion before it makes a decision. Instead, board members must select issues that have a broad impact on the students and the community.

Based on feedback from the inquiry interviews, CASB and Schoolhouse Communications developed a one-page handout for focus group participants that identified five major topic areas and asked participants to rank which of the following topics they thought would be the most important for the community to discuss.

The topics, followed by sample discussion questions, were:

- **Student achievement.** What skills and knowledge should high school graduates of BVSD possess?
- **School safety.** What do safe schools look like? What are the community's expectations regarding student safety?
- **Student nutrition and wellness.** What are the community's views on the district's role to ensure good student nutrition and health?
- **District budget and accountability.** What are the community's expectations regarding the reporting of how taxpayer funds are spent on student learning and achievement as well as the return on their investment?
- **School buildings and facilities.** What are the community's values regarding the condition of our schools and the impact of facilities on student learning?

Participants were asked to rank the topics from one to five in order of importance — one is of most interest while 5 is of least interest. (Some declined to do so.) If none of the five topics appealed to focus group participants, facilitators encouraged them to share other discussion topics of interest to them.

Student achievement ranks number one

In most focus groups, student achievement was identified as the number one issue for community engagement. Participants viewed this as the priority work of the superintendent and the board, and ultimately the main mission of the school district. Student achievement also was viewed as an issue of communitywide interest.

The conversation in focus groups about student achievement quickly surfaced potential subtopics for discussion such as how student achievement is defined; how definitions vary from culture to culture; how student achievement is measured (CSAP, standards-based grading and other data points); closing the achievement gap while also challenging high-achieving students; school and student equity; standards; dropout prevention; bilingual education; providing a well-rounded education; social, emotional and 21st century skills; and preparing for options after graduation including college, vocational school, technical careers and other avenues.



“What do we need for students to be successful and how do we pay for it? We need to have a conversation about what we are willing to pay for and what we really want in our schools.”
— participant

Teacher quality and performance also surfaced as issues in the context of student achievement. Specific topics included how to attract and retain the best educators in the state; exploring teachers' impact on student achievement; and identifying effective teaching strategies for use throughout the district. “Help us understand the linkage between students' scores and the quality of teaching at that school,” said a participant. “What can we learn from those findings?”

Some participants said the other issues on the handout — such as the district budget and student nutrition — were related to student achievement and also were potential subtopics for conversation. “What do we need for students to be successful and how do we pay for it?” asked one participant. “We need to have a conversation about what we are willing to pay for and what we really want in our schools.”

Others encouraged more discussion about how policies and mandates at the state and federal levels affect learning and teaching in BVSD. Specific issues included bilingual education, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and increased discussions about a “P-20” system (pre-kindergarten through grade 20). “NCLB is directly impacting Columbine and Pioneer,” said one participant. “Have discussions about how and why.”

Student nutrition/wellness and school facilities lower on the priority list

Although the issues of student nutrition/wellness and school facilities typically ranked lower than the issues more directly focused on achievement, many participants underscored their importance. One focus group participant wrote this on the handout, “Please don't over-read this ranking; even five is quite important.” Several participants echoed this sentiment. Those who ranked these topics low generally said that facilities issues were recently addressed by the last bond campaign. Student nutrition and wellness, while viewed as important, tended to fall to the bottom because some did not see it as the district's main mission.

Other discussion topics

Additional discussion topics suggested by focus group participants and interview subjects included:

- Clarification about the school board's role and the district's role
- School calendar
- Late-start Wednesdays
- Changing school boundaries, school closures and the impact of new housing developments on school enrollment patterns
- Open enrollment and school choice
- School marketing — meeting public demand (What is the allure of charter schools in the district, and how can public schools better promote their offerings and fill in the gaps?)
- High school parent involvement



- Meeting the needs of at-risk children — after-school programs
- Team-building and self-esteem building for students
- Immigration issues
- Student alienation, drug abuse and suicide prevention
- Issues related to diversity (ethnic, racial and sexual orientation) and their impact on learning; leadership reflective of diverse cultures

• Recommendations

The purpose of the focus group and interview process was to test assumptions regarding the development of a comprehensive and sustainable community engagement plan that will meet the board's goals for improving community engagement in the district. In general, we found that the components of such a plan outlined in the CASB/Schoolhouse Communications proposal to the board are on target. The focus groups and interviews provided valuable information that we will use as we work with the board, superintendent and community engagement advisory team to develop the plan.

As confirmed by focus group and interview participants, the district's community engagement plan should contain a mix of strategies, including small-group discussions and more informal, one-on-one conversations. Technology should be used where appropriate, but not as a replacement for face-to-face conversations. Dialogue sessions should be held in each of the school district's nine communities. Engagement efforts should focus largely on issues that directly impact student achievement. The district should employ community engagement strategies prior to decision-making and only for issues on which the district truly wants input from the community.

The following recommendations serve as a basis for the development of the district's community engagement plan.

1. **Advisory team.** Create a community engagement advisory team consisting of both internal and external stakeholders to help the board extend its reach into the community and to build support for its engagement efforts. Members will help promote community engagement sessions among their networks, encourage broad support for the community engagement process and help the board evaluate the effectiveness of its community engagement plan.

Strategies include:

- *Team member identification and recruitment.* Identify and recruit advisory team members who represent the values of the district's nine communities to ensure broad and deep participation in the community engagement process.
- *Job description.* Create a job description for team members. Define overarching expectations of the team, specific roles and responsibilities of team members, and members' time commitment.
- *Monthly schedule.* Set a schedule of monthly advisory team meetings throughout the year. Communicate regularly with team members about how their input was used and how specifically the board wants to tap their skill set or their connections to a particular constituency group.



- 2. Board vision/definition.** Clarify and communicate the board's vision and an agreed-upon definition for community engagement. This is essential to creating sustainability for the program and clearly defining the board's role in the community engagement process.

Strategies include:

- *Board policy.* Craft a board policy that outlines the board's vision, definition, and roles and responsibilities for community engagement.
- *Messages.* Develop messages and talking points that explain how the school board will meet its vision; why community engagement is critical to the board's decision-making process; how community input will be used; and who plays what role in the process (superintendent, school board, community, staff, etc.). Include messages and talking points in the communications plan. (See next item.)

- 3. Communications plan.** Promote and support the community engagement program by developing a communications plan that focuses on major categories such as feedback loops (how participants' input was used in the decision-making process), broad promotion of community engagement sessions, information about what community engagement is and why it is relevant to BVSD's mission, and media relations.

Strategies include:

- *Definition, vision and value-add of community engagement.* Communicate widely and repeatedly the common definition and vision for community engagement as well as roles and responsibilities mentioned in the section above, using agreed upon messages and talking points. Be sure to discuss the benefits of community engagement and ways the school board is working to improve the process.
- *Feedback loops.* Develop a consistent process for sharing timely information with participants about what information was gathered during the community engagement process and how it will be used. Always explain (with the help of data, examples, etc.) why the superintendent and the school board chose a specific direction or path — especially if it was different from the community's expressed desire.
- *Media.* Develop media strategies to inform the community about improved community engagement efforts, promote upcoming sessions and report back on major findings. Consider news releases, media advisories, opinion editorials, letters to the editor and editorial board meetings.
- *Other communications vehicles.* Explore other communications tools and networks to promote community engagement sessions and findings. These might include posting fliers at dog parks, playgrounds and senior centers; tapping word-of-mouth networks and the communications tools of popular businesses; interacting with the faith-based community and non-profits serving targeted audiences; and exploring high-tech avenues such as Twitter, text messages, Facebook and blogs.



- *Advisory team.* Tap the advisory team to identify strategies that promote community engagement sessions to ensure participation beyond the “usual suspects.”
 - *Support materials.* Develop support materials for the district’s community engagement program, which could include a community engagement tool kit, participant study guides, facilitator guides, meeting agendas, sample invitation and thank-you letters, and templates for summarizing community dialogues and next steps.
4. **Design and recruitment.** Design a variety of methods to engage the community — using and improving existing efforts as well as creating dedicated dialogue sessions on student-achievement topics.

Strategies include:

- *Types of discussions.* Identify which dialogue process best fits the topic for discussion. (Some issues may require a much more involved, deliberative process than others.) For example, hold communitywide small-group dialogue sessions on an issue of importance to both the district and the community at large. Identify and pursue more informal methods of community engagement as well.
 - *Two-way dialogue.* Improve existing methods to better facilitate two-way dialogue. For example, regarding the DAC, the administration and DAC leadership might jointly develop an annual agenda and devote time at each DAC meeting for issues that come from DAC members.
 - *Issue framing.* Develop a process for framing issues to inform the dialogue, including sharing informational materials in advance of the conversation or on location at the community engagement session.
 - *Recruitment.* Actively recruit a broad range of participants, including parents and non-parents who are not active in district committees, senior citizens, the Latino community and hard-to-reach communities.
5. **Facilitator “bank.”** Develop a bank of skilled, unbiased facilitators to conduct formal dialogue sessions.

Strategies include:

- *Training.* Consider specific training topics such as overview of the findings in this report, grounding in the board’s definition of community engagement, dialogue versus debate, how to effectively use tension in the group, assuring that people participate equally, determining whether there is common ground, and summarizing and recording results.
- *Tools.* Use the community engagement tool kit noted earlier as a major training tool and an “at-your-fingertips” resource for facilitators (as well as school board members and community engagement advisory team members) that could be updated once or twice throughout the year to reflect feedback from facilitators and board members.



6. **Communications Department Liaison.** Assign community engagement management responsibilities to the communications department. To be effective and sustained, the community engagement initiative needs a staff member who can navigate internal structures and serve as a day-to-day contact for the district's community engagement process. We recommend that this position be housed in the communications department and led by an individual who collaborates closely with departments in the district.
7. **Evaluation.** Develop effective methods and tools to enable the superintendent and the school board to evaluate the effectiveness of its community engagement program on an ongoing basis.

Strategies include:

- *Feedback forms.* Ask participants to fill out short feedback forms immediately after a community engagement session as well as conducting a broader online survey of individuals who participated in community engagement sessions over time.
- *In-depth debriefing sessions.* Conduct debriefing sessions with board members, key district staff, the community engagement advisory team and facilitators after major community engagement sessions are held.
- *Analysis of themes and concerns.* Study notes from dialogue sessions to identify key themes, concerns and areas needing adjustment.
- *Feedback session.* Connect with focus group and interview participants one year from now to gather perspectives about whether they are seeing improvements and what challenges remain.



• Conclusion

Engaging the community takes time, resources, and the full commitment of the school board and superintendent, but the payoff can be huge. Research gathered by the National School Public Relations Association for the Communication Accountability Program in 2008 shows that building broad-based community support leads to higher expectations and higher student achievement.

The findings in this report reinforce best practices in community engagement. They also underscore the importance of having a board vision to guide community engagement and a more specific community engagement plan that maps out clear expectations from the start, topics for conversation, participant recruitment and feedback loops so participants know how their input influenced the decision-making process.

While the approaches may vary and discussion topics may change over time, the ultimate goal is to integrate community engagement appropriately into the important work of helping every child achieve at high levels. A sustainable community engagement process must withstand changes in board and district leadership for it to truly take root and thrive.

CASB and Schoolhouse Communications commend the school board and the superintendent for their desire to develop a more meaningful, balanced and transparent community engagement process. We also wish to thank interview subjects and focus group participants as well as the superintendent, school board and the staff of the BVSD Communications Division for their assistance with this project. Our gratitude to the Rose Community Foundation and Impact on Education for their financial support of this project.





Boulder Valley Board of Education Community Engagement Project

Focus Group Tool Kit

February 11, 2009

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Overview

CASB and Schoolhouse Communications have prepared this focus group tool kit to assist BVSD with focus group recruitment and participant confirmation. This tool kit provides sample materials – such as a phone script, an invitation note and a confirmation letter – that BVSD can further customize as it sees fit for different audiences.

CASB and Schoolhouse Communications are committed to ensuring that your focus group project is a success. Please contact Jennifer Reeve at 303-832-1000, ext. 2704, with questions or to trouble-shoot issues as they arise.

Major Deadlines

Identify make-up of focus groups (work group).....	Feb. 11
Recruit focus groups (BVSD).....	Feb. 16-March 31
Send confirmation emails/letters to participants (BVSD)	within 1 day of confirmation
Submit final, approved focus group script (CASB/Schoolhouse)	March 26
Complete focus group recruitment (BVSD).....	March 31
Submit focus group schedule (BVSD).....	March 31 (<i>or sooner</i>)
Order refreshments (BVSD)	2-3 days prior to focus groups
Make reminder calls to participants (BVSD).....	day before focus group
Conduct focus groups (CASB/Schoolhouse)	week of April 13
Coordinate refreshments (BVSD).....	day of focus groups
Send thank-you letters to participants (BVSD)	within 4-5 days after focus groups

Focus Group Schedule

Focus groups will be conducted the week of April 13. BVSD will be responsible for developing a more detailed schedule in collaboration with CASB and Schoolhouse Communications that includes dates, times and locations for each focus group. CASB and Schoolhouse Communications will identify facilitators for each focus group and share this information with BVSD for inclusion in the schedule.

Focus Group Do's and Don'ts

Here are some helpful tips developed by CASB to keep in mind when recruiting focus group participants:

DO's:

- *Do* select individuals representative of all demographic groups in your community.
- *Do* select participants who are school district supporters, as well as those who do not have a high level of involvement with or may not support the district. Opinion leaders make good participants.
- *Do* invite participants by personal phone call with a follow-up email to ensure maximum participation. *See sample invitation on page 6.*
- *Do* share enough information about the process and the issues so that participants feel comfortable in participating. *See frequently asked questions on pages 5-6.*
- *Do* make people feel welcome when they come to participate.
- *Do* provide refreshments during the focus groups.
- *Do* expect focus groups to produce some criticism from the staff and community. When you choose to conduct focus groups you are agreeing to take both positive and negative input.
- *Do* plan to use focus group results and to tell people how you will use them.
- *Do* follow focus groups up with a thank-you letter to participants, along with information on the results. *See sample thank you letter on page 9.*
- *Do* consider making focus group results available to the community and the media. In most cases, focus group reports are considered a matter of public record.

DON'TS:

- *Don't* select only "friends" of the school district to participate. To get useful data, you need broad-based views.

- *Don't* share focus group questions with anyone beyond your communications project team before the interviews take place. This could taint the results.
- *Don't* allow members of the board, the superintendent or employee participants' supervisors to sit in on focus groups. This could make people hesitant to share their true feelings.
- *Don't* allow employees and their superiors to participate in the same focus group for the reason listed above.
- *Don't* allow groups to be larger than 12 people; 8-10 is ideal.
- *Don't* expect individuals' names to be used in the focus group report. Information is reported by group, not by name, to ensure confidentiality.
- *Don't* conduct focus groups if you do not want to hear criticism or if you do not plan to use the results in some way.

Make-up of Focus Groups

CASB and Schoolhouse Communications will conduct six, 90-minute focus groups representing a cross-section of BVSD staff, parents, students and opinion leaders from the district's nine communities.

We ask that every focus group include a mix of the following stakeholders:

- 2 parent leaders (serve on school accountability committees; PTA; district committees)
- 1 high school student (student leaders– e.g., high school president, etc.)
- 1 teacher (mix of elementary, secondary and high school)
- 1 principal (mix of elementary, secondary and high school)
- 1 classified employee (school secretary, bus drivers, cafeteria employees, etc.)
- 1 senior citizen or empty nester
- 1 business community member
- 1 alumnus/alumna aged 18- to 30-years-old
- 2 non-profit leaders such as faith-based community, law enforcement, community service agencies (with a special emphasis on community advocates or opinion leaders for ethnic minorities, low-income individuals, etc.)
- 1 higher education representative

Criteria for Participants and Recruitment Strategies

Focus groups *should not* exceed 12 people per group. Likewise, groups under eight individuals will not yield the depth of information required for this project and will need to be rescheduled after numbers are increased.

When recruiting participants, please consider the following criteria and recruitment tips:

Criteria for *parent leaders*:

- Parents with children in BVSD
- Parents who are knowledgeable about BVSD
- Parents who have taken on a leadership role in the district and in schools
- Parents who are *not* employees or recent former employees of the district
- Mix of parents of students at different grade levels from K-12

Contact: Principals, school/district accountability committees, PTA

Criteria for *students*:

- Students in grades 11-12 only
- Students who are considered leaders in their schools (e.g., class president, valedictorian, lead in school musical, community-service oriented, etc.)
- A mix of students who have attended BVSD schools for at least three years up to their entire academic career

Contact: Principals, student government leaders, IB program directors

Criteria for *teachers*:

- Teachers of students representing different grade levels
- Teachers with varying years of experience at BVSD with a preference for three years or more
- Teachers considered leaders in the district (e.g., serve on districtwide committees, teacher association representatives)
- A mix of teachers including association members and those who are not members.

Contact: Teacher association, principals (for referrals), district leaders

Criteria for *principals*:

- Principals of students representing different grade levels
- Principals of varying years of experience at APS with a preference for three years or more
- Principal leaders who serve on district committees

Contact: Principals, central administration (for referrals)

Key criteria for *classified employees*:

- Classified employees from both the elementary and secondary schools
- Classified employees with varying years of experience at BVSD with a preference for three years or more

- Classified employees who represent a broad cross section of food service, transportation, maintenance, custodial services, etc. Please include school secretaries – they often their school’s hub of information!

Contact: District leaders and associations representing these constituencies, principals

Criteria for *central office staff*:

- Central office staff should reflect a strong mix of mid-level specialists in curriculum, IT, HR, instructional specialists, etc.
- Recruit individuals with varying years of experience in BVSD
- Central office staff who are not part of this project’s inquiry interviews

Contact: District leaders representing these constituencies

Criteria for *senior citizens/empty nesters*

- Seniors/empty nesters who volunteer in BVSD schools
- Seniors/empty nesters who have no connection to the district
- Seniors/empty nesters who have served on district-wide committees
- Seniors/empty nesters who are *not* employees of the district

Contact: Principals/teacher, retired teacher groups, senior citizen centers, non-profit groups serving senior citizens, AARP local chapter, district committees

Key criteria for *business community*

- Businesses that employ a large number of school district graduates
- Business leaders who are active and influential in the community

Contact: Chambers of Commerce, community service organizations such as Rotary, etc.

Key criteria for *non-profit leaders*

- Participants should *not* be employees of the district; ok if they have children attending schools in the district
- Recruit community advocates or opinion leaders for ethnic minorities, low income individuals, etc.

Contact: Major non-profit groups, ministerial alliances, major churches/ministries/synagogues/etc., law enforcement agencies

Key criteria for *higher education leaders*

- Participants should *not* be employees of the district; ok if they have children attending schools in the district
- Participants preferably have an awareness of K-16 issues and/or a connection to BVSD (e.g., higher education representative who serves on a district committee, etc.)

Contact: University of Colorado – Boulder; district leaders

Key criteria for *alumnus/alumna aged 18- to 30-years-old*

- Participants should *not* be employees of the district; ok if they have children attending schools in the district

Contact: Alumni associations; graduates; etc.

Frequently Asked Questions

As you recruit individuals to participate in focus groups, you may be asked the following questions:

WHAT ARE FOCUS GROUPS?

Focus groups are a form of research often used to provide information on people's thoughts and feelings about an organization, issue or idea. They can help determine:

- Perceptions that may influence behavior toward an organization
- *Why* people hold certain views and what is important to them
- Areas where information is needed
- Effective ways to deliver information
- How particular demographic groups differ in their opinions
- Public receptiveness to new ideas or changes

Focus groups are an excellent tool to provide a barometer of public opinion.

HOW DO FOCUS GROUPS WORK?

A focus group typically is made up of up to 12 participants. The group sits “meeting style” around a table to participate in a free-flowing discussion led by a trained moderator. The moderator follows a “script” or specific set of questions, probing issues brought up by group members and recording the input by the group. The moderator also looks for other communication cues such as body language and tone of voice.

Focus groups are typically 90 minutes in length.

WILL COMMENTS BE ATTRIBUTED TO PARTICIPANTS BY NAME?

No. Participants are guaranteed that their individual comments will be kept confidential and that only group results or trends are reported. While quotes may be included in the final report to illustrate or emphasize a point, no quotes will be attributed by name.

WHAT WILL BE DONE WITH THE INFORMATION?

CASB and Schoolhouse Communications will analyze the findings and prepare a comprehensive report for the Boulder Valley School Board and superintendent. The findings will be used to help the school board and district leaders develop a more effective community engagement process.

Phone Script/Invitation

Hi. This is INSERT NAME calling from Boulder Valley School District, or BVSD. I'm calling to ask you to attend a 90-minute focus group from INSERT DATE AND TIME at INSERT LOCATION.

The Boulder Valley Board of Education wants to learn more about how we can better engage our community in conversations about our students' education. Our goal in conducting this research is to learn more about how the school board and superintendent can more effectively listen to the community's views about its schools. We're interested in talking with the community, parents, students and staff. Your feedback will help us more effectively reach out to *all* members of our community to have deeper, more meaningful conversations about how to best prepare our students for successful futures.

You will be joined by several other individuals for a small group conversation. A facilitator will lead the conversation.

There's no advance preparation necessary. We're interested in hearing your opinion!

We'll also provide refreshments.

[get confirmation...or find out when you can call back to get confirmation]

Please arrive 10 minutes early so that we may start and end on time. We'll meet INSERT DATE AND TIME at INSERT LOCATION.

The success of the focus group depends on the turnout - thanks again for agreeing to participate.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at INSERT PHONE NUMBER.

I will email a confirmation letter to you with all the details in the coming day.

[ask for email address or snail mail address if person does not have email]

Thanks, again, and we'll see you on the INSERT DATE. Please watch for the confirmation note.

Confirmation Email/Letter

INSERT DATE

[first name] [last name]

[address]

[city, state, zip]

Dear [first name]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group about how the Boulder Valley Board of Education can improve its community engagement process. Your feedback will help us more effectively reach out to our community to have deeper, more meaningful conversations about our children's education.

We'll meet from INSERT DATE AND TIME. Please arrive at INSERT LOCATION 10 minutes early so that we may start and end on time. Our address is INSERT. The focus group will be held in the INSERT NAME OF CONFERENCE ROOM OR ROOM NUMBER.

There's no advance preparation necessary. Snacks will be provided.

If you have any questions, feel free to me at INSERT PHONE AND EMAIL.

The success of the focus group depends on your participation.

Thanks again.

Sincerely,

INSERT NAME

Focus Group Coordinator

Reminder Call

Hi. This is INSERT NAME calling from Boulder Valley School District. I'm calling to remind you about tomorrow's focus group.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our focus group to help the board of education improve our efforts to engage the community about education issues. There's no advance preparation necessary.

Please arrive at INSERT LOCATION 10 minutes early so that we may start and end on time. We'll meet from INSERT TIME to INSERT TIME in the INSERT ROOM NUMBER OR ROOM NAME at INSERT ADDRESS. Snacks will be provided.

The success of the focus group depends heavily on the turnout - thanks again for agreeing to participate. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at INSERT PHONE NUMBER AND EMAIL ADDRESS.

Thank You Note

INSERT DATE

[first name] [last name]
[address]
[city, state, zip]

Dear [first name]:

Thank you for your participation in the focus group about how the Boulder Valley Board of Education and district leaders can improve our community engagement process with staff, parents and the community.

We appreciate your taking the time to join us and to provide insights.

Your feedback will help us more effectively reach out to our community to have deeper, more meaningful conversations about our children's education.

We learned a lot from your feedback, including:

[INSERT 3-5 MAJOR FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS]

Thanks again for your help and your time!

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

With warm regards,

Helayne Jones, Ed.D, president
Boulder Valley Board of Education

Chris King, Ph.D, superintendent
Boulder Valley School District

Focus Group Refreshments

Morning groups:

- Breakfast items such as bagels, cream cheese, fruit salad, etc.
- Coffee, water, juice

Lunch groups:

- Boxed lunches are best with a mix of sandwiches available, including a few vegetarian options
- Water, diet pop, regular pop

Dinner groups:

- Boxed sandwiches are best with a mix of options, including a few vegetarian options
- Water, diet pop, regular pop

In-between meals groups:

- Trail mix, candy, fruit
- Water, diet pop, regular pop, coffee