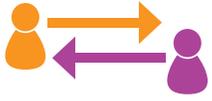


Two-Way Communication for District Leaders



SUPPORTING TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

It takes a village. In order to most effectively support students' development and learning, all members of the school community must collaborate - families, educators, principals and district leaders. With the daily operation of schools, it is often typical for families, educators, and principals to find opportunities to interact regarding students' learning and development. However, this direct connection with families is not always as clear or intuitive on the district level, and will not meet the needs of historically underserved families who may not engage in traditional ways. Therefore, it is important for district leaders to find ways of creating space and opportunities to directly engage with families to gain a deeper understanding of their children's educational and social experience. This reciprocal exchange with families can also allow for district leaders to share and gain valuable information, feedback, and input that can be used to inform and strengthen districtwide efforts to foster students' success. Moreover, it is then particularly relevant in supporting implementation of the formative assessment process.

Families and district leaders can be authentic partners in informing assessment practices and policies developed to document students' ongoing learning and influence decision-making regarding services, resources, and supports needed for continued academic success. Opportunities, such as town hall meetings and listening tours, are a few tools that can be helpful strategies to facilitate this type of two-way communication directly between families and district leaders. This section provides guidance and resources for district leaders, along with examples of promising practices from throughout the field.



This resource is a strategy that district leaders can use as they develop policies at the District level, as well as to support efforts to interact directly with families. District leaders can use two-way communication to learn about families' experiences in being engaged in the process of supporting their child in the formative assessment process, and to surface the cultural considerations necessary for effective communication.

Recommendations

Implementation Settings

- Town hall meetings
- Listening tours
- Back to school nights
- Annual/periodic family engagement events
- Phone calls
- Anonymous surveys
- Coffee talks

Planning Time: 90 minutes per event

Implementation Time: Dependent on event

Principals can use this resource to plan for school-level and districtwide events that involve two-way communication with families.

Town Hall Meetingsⁱ

What is the purpose of a town hall meeting?

A town hall meeting consists of members invested in the success of a school community coming together to share information and/or discuss a set of issues of common interest. Town hall meetings can be used to convene a diverse coalition of stakeholders from across a school district, including families, educators, business leaders, local elected officials, philanthropies, and community organizations. As such, this method of communication can allow for district leaders and families (*along with other key stakeholders*) to engage in a reciprocal dialogue to share relevant information and

valuable feedback. Beyond providing an opportunity to have a dialogue about significant issues impacting the school community, town hall meetings can also allow for space to explore solutions to existing issues and to identify actions needed. By engaging stakeholders at all levels, district leaders can help to facilitate a collaborative and solution-focused dialogue with a wide range of partners dedicated to strengthening the school community.

Planning for a town hall meeting

Like most meetings, the first step in the planning process is **establishing objectives and getting organized**. To effectively plan and coordinate a town hall meeting, understanding the priorities and goals for the meeting will help to guide the subsequent planning process - from setting the agenda to determining potential speakers. After objectives are set, an organizational plan that delineates responsibilities and those charged with carrying out the various aspects of the meeting is beneficial. A staff person and family/community member might serve as a co-coordinator for the event to ensure effective implementation. District leaders might also use this as an opportunity to engage with families and other members of the school community by inviting representatives to provide input on the planning process and take on lead roles in the event. When considering budgetary costs, town hall meetings can be put on without significant expense by utilizing available low-cost meeting space and supplying a small amount of funding to cover costs, such as staff time, office supply use, child care and/or refreshments, and interpreters.

The next step in the planning process is **setting the agenda**. With the objectives set and a clear understanding of funding available, an agenda can be developed to ensure that the event maximizes resources and achieves the desired outcome. As previously discussed, designing the agenda with a dual focus on both the substance of the issue and identifying solutions can foster an action-oriented dialogue with families and other stakeholders. The agenda should clearly capture the purpose



and desired outcome of the town hall meeting. Generally speaking, a town hall agenda may include a

presentation from a subject matter expert outlining the issue, discussion from a panel of stakeholders to share their perspective, and opportunities for audience participation to join the dialogue and share input. Effective agendas can help to foster two-way communication between district leadership and stakeholders and create opportunities for all to effectively share

information that contributes to decisions impacting the school district.

The next step is to **identify key participants**, including a moderator, panelists, and/or guest speakers. A significant part of planning a successful town hall meeting is determining the individuals appropriate to serve in these roles. An effective **moderator** can be helpful in keeping the discussion moving and on point. Ideally, the moderator should have some familiarity with the issues being discussed, but the ability to facilitate a collaborative conversation is of foremost importance. "The moderator should thoroughly understand the objective of the meeting... should be able to insert questions or topics to keep the meeting moving as necessary... and should be skilled enough to achieve a consensus among the key stakeholders on a definitive path forward." The inclusion of **panelists and/or guest** speakers can create opportunities for information sharing from multiple perspectives and from various stakeholders. Furthermore, including family members as participants on a panel or as a guest speaker during a town hall meeting can support open communication and ensure space to gather feedback. Other participants could be educators, principals, policymakers, business leaders, agency representatives, or other members in the community invested in the positive outcomes of young children. All panelists and/or guest speakers should be informed in advance of the meeting objectives and agenda so they can prepare appropriately. While identifying key participants, it is important to keep in mind that town hall meetings are essentially about

understanding the issues from various perspectives. Leaders play an important role by ensuring representation from multiple stakeholders and setting the tone for all voices to be welcomed and valued.

The last step is engaging in an **effective outreach** effort. To ensure attendance to the town hall meeting, develop a list of stakeholders - both individuals and organizations - that should be invited to attend. To assist with developing this list, consider the universe of community members that is most likely to be interested in and impacted by the topic to be discussed. A variety of communication tools could be employed to promote the meeting, including announcements in newsletters, email, and through social media. Even phone calls can add a personal touch in inviting others to this important gathering. Although actual outreach is often one of the final steps, it is critical to begin planning for outreach early in the process to ensure the audience for the meeting aligns with the town hall's objectives.

Sample Town Hall Meeting Plan

ABRIDGED TOWN HALL PLANNING CHECKLIST

	Tasks	Estimated Due Date	Person(s) Responsible
3 Months Prior to Meeting	Identify Meeting Coordinator		
	Identify school community representatives to provide feedback on planning		
	Determine objective and scope of the meeting		
	Identify audience for the meeting and plans for outreach effort		
	Determine desired range of dates for meeting		
	Determine meeting budget		
	Identify desired speakers and/or moderator		
	Explore available meeting venues		
2 to 3 Months Prior To Meeting	Solidify meeting date		
	Confirm all speakers and/or moderator		
	Inspect and reserve meeting space		
	Plan outreach to invite school community		
Final Month Prior To Meeting	Identify needed staff/volunteers to coordinate activities at the meeting		
	Secure child care to support family participation		
	Conduct outreach to invite school community (e.g. social media, website announcement, flyers, etc.)		
	Reconfirm meeting site arrangement		
	Reconfirm speakers and/or moderator		
	Secure translators/interpretation services, if needed		
Meeting Day	Purchase/deliver refreshments		
	Staff and/or volunteers arrive and complete assigned tasks		
	Hold the meeting		
	Post-meeting activities (e.g., clean up, exit surveys, etc.)		
Post Meeting	Send a thank-you letter from district leader to school community		
	Develop summary report		
	Facilitate any next steps		

Listening Toursⁱⁱ

What is the purpose of a Listening Tour?

Like town hall meetings, a listening tour can be a strategy used by district leaders for the explicit purpose of communicating with others to collect insights, ideas, and context, particularly before making important decisions. However, listening tours are often conducted as a series of interactions with small groups of stakeholders rather than a larger, collective meeting event as with town halls. Intimate conversations can be held in a variety of settings - over coffee or lunch, with individual families or educators, in a school or community setting. District leaders can ask questions to solicit feedback from stakeholders in the district community and create space for stakeholders to ask questions of leadership in return. This reciprocal exchange, particularly with families, can allow for district leaders to gain valuable information, as well as for families to provide input into key issues that impact their children's educational experience. Moreover, listening tours provide opportunities for open communication between families and leadership that is the foundation of building meaningful relationships - a key element of a strong school community.

Planning for a Listening Tourⁱⁱ

Even though listening tour formats are generally a smaller size and less structured compared to town halls, planning is still important for effective outcomes.

Determine whom to listen to. Before conducting listening tours, it is beneficial for district leaders to first clarify the objective of this effort and, based on these identified goals, determine who would be helpful to engage for insight and input. Careful planning of the composition of the group and the discussion topics to be addressed helps ensure an experience in which participants can feel free to talk and express opinions.

Reach out to participants. Once the potential participants have been identified, careful consideration of who reaches out to participants and how must be considered. Receiving an invitation directly from the district leader can be a powerful way to engage families. In other cases, identifying a staff member, a parent, or even a trusted community leader who has frequent interactions with identified participants may be most effective. In any case, use of a variety of outreach techniques including phone calls, emails, and direct face-to-face invitations can be effective

engagement strategies. Other considerations during the recruitment process include:

- Offering incentives to show appreciation and encourage participation (e.g. gift cards, stipends, passes to events, special recognition, etc.);
- Anticipating and providing resources and supports to ensure participation (e.g. child care, transportation, meals or snacks, translation/interpreting services, etc.); and
- Emphasizing the benefits of participation and how input will be used to inform decision-making on behalf of the school district.

Announce intention. Prior to the listening tours, district leaders may also want to announce the intention or share identified objectives for the effort. By communicating the intent to potential attendees beforehand, stakeholders are informed about the topics that will be discussed, and how feedback will be used. This can set the stage for an open dialogue with all participants. See the details to Incorporate into an Announcement of a Listening Tour.

Create a list of questions. Developing a series of guiding questions may be helpful in framing each of the discussions. The questions can be simple prompts to foster conversation and should be informed by the objectives identified for the effort. Ideally, discussions during the listening tours will flow naturally and the guiding questions can be used as a support to ensure the topics intended to be discussed are the focus of the conversation. See the **Guiding Questions to Use in a Formative Assessment Listening Tour**.



DETAILS TO INCORPORATE INTO AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF A LISTENING TOUR.

1. What is the listening tour about?
2. When and where is the listening tour happening?
3. Who will run the listening tour meetings?
4. What sort of things will be discussed at the meetings?
5. I can't attend the meeting, I'd rather not give my comments at a meeting, or I have additional comments to make. Is there some other way for me to share my view?
6. What will happen to the notes of the meetings?
7. Who else might be "listening" to the outcomes of the listening tour?
8. Will transportation, refreshments, child care, and interpreting be provided? How?
9. Whom can I contact for further information?

GUIDING QUESTIONS TO USE IN A FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT LISTENING TOUR^{IV}

1. How would you describe your child's school? What kinds of things is he/she learning and doing?
2. How well do you understand the way your child's learning and development is measured? What questions do you have?
3. What is most important for you to understand about your child's learning? How do you want information shared with you?
4. In which ways do you interact with your child's teacher to support his/her learning? How often do you meet/communicate? Does your child's teacher know the goals you have for your child? How do you want to share information about your goals you have for your child?
5. In which ways do you interact with your child's principal to support your child's learning? How often do you meet/communicate?
6. What do you feel are the most important things the teachers/school are doing to help your child? What else does your child need to be successful in school?

Conduct the listening tour. By openly listening to feedback, input, and questions from stakeholders and families, listening tours provide an important opportunity to exchange information for key decision-making. (*See Communication & Collaboration Tips for effective strategies to use while conducting listening tours.*) During listening tours, a strengths-based approach respects each stakeholder's diversity, home language, cultural and ethnic background. Partner with translators or organizations that provide interpreting services to conduct the session in the primary language of participants. Furthermore, capturing all that is said is important and will ensure that information shared can be used later on. Be sure to designate a "recorder" who can collect all input in written form or use a recording device with assurances to participants that all discussions will be confidential.

A sequence to follow when conducting a listening tour session includes:

- Thank the group (or individual) for agreeing to participate.
- Review the intent and the goals of the session.
- Review the process (*how the session will proceed, how each participant can contribute, etc.*).
- Set the tone for the session that all voices are welcome and valued. Use strengths-based language that conveys trust and respect.
- Ask questions. Open with a general open-ended question or a specific issue.
- Paraphrase and ask for more input, and ask follow-up questions to predetermined questions.
- When all questions have been asked, solicit closing thoughts and comments, share next steps, and thank participants for their time and assistance.

After the meeting, review the data collected. If the session has been recorded, prepare a transcript and summary. Ask a number of people to review the information independently, and then convene the group to discuss, looking for emerging patterns, common themes, new questions, concerns raised, or surprises. Be sure to share the findings with the listening tour participants. By engaging participants in analysis and reflections, district leaders are able to not only honor their contribution, but also set the stage for further engagement with the school district.

COMMUNICATION & COLLABORATION TIPS FOR LISTENING TOURSⁱⁱⁱ

1. PAUSING

Pausing before responding or asking a question allows time for thinking and enhances dialogue, discussion, and decision-making.

2. PARAPHRASING

Using a paraphrase starter that is comfortable for you – “So...” or “As you are...” or “You’re thinking...” – and following the starter with an efficient paraphrase assists members of the group in hearing and understanding one another as they converse and make decisions.

3. POSING QUESTIONS

Two intentions of posing questions are to explore and to specify thinking. Questions may be posed to explore perceptions, assumptions, and interpretations, and to invite others to inquire into their thinking. For example, “What might be some conjectures you are exploring?” Use focusing questions such as, “Which students, specifically?” or “What might be an example of that?” to increase the clarity and precision of group members’ thinking. Inquire into others’ ideas before advocating your own.

4. PUTTING IDEAS ON THE TABLE

Ideas are the heart of meaningful dialogue and discussion. Label the intention of your comments. For example: “Here is one idea...” or “One thought I have is...” or “Here is a possible approach...” or “Another consideration might be...”

5. PROVIDING DATA

Providing data, both qualitative and quantitative, in a variety of forms supports group members in constructing shared understanding from their work. Data have no meaning beyond what we make of it; shared meaning develops from collaboratively exploring, analyzing, and interpreting data.

6. PAYING ATTENTION TO SELF AND OTHERS

Meaningful dialogue and discussion are facilitated when each group member is conscious of self and others, and is aware of what (s)he is saying and how it is said as well as how others are responding. This includes paying attention to learning styles when planning, facilitating, and participating in group meetings and conversations.

7. PRESUMING POSITIVE INTENTIONS

Assuming that others’ intentions are positive promotes and facilitates meaningful dialogue and discussion, and prevents unintentional put-downs. Using positive intentions in speech is one manifestation of this norm.

RESOURCES

ⁱAmerican College of Emergency Physicians (n.d.). Chapter guide to organizing, planning and executing a town hall meeting. Retrieved from <https://www.acep.org/uploadedFiles/ACEP/advocacy/state/Guide%20to%20Hosting%20a%20Town%20Hall%20Meeting.pdf>

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^{iv}University of Hawaii. (n.d.). UH Hilo 2010-2018 Strategic Plan Pre-planning: Listening tour. Retrieved from <http://hilo.hawaii.edu/uhh/vcsa/documents/DSAListeningTourInfoSep292010.pdf>