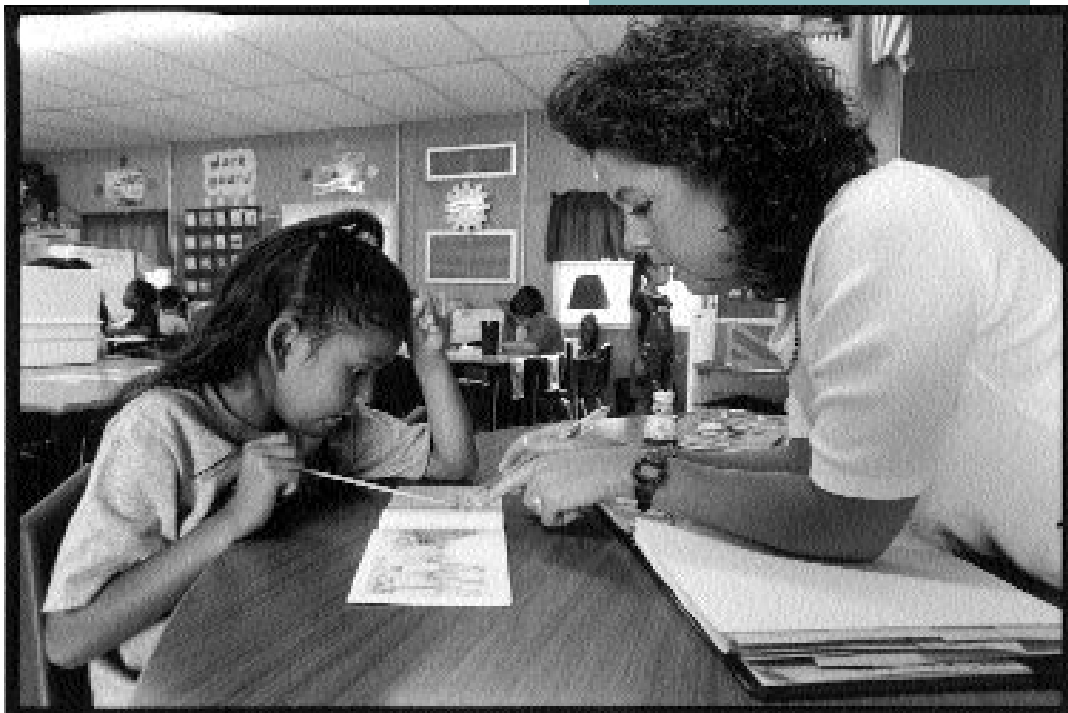


Building Support for Better Schools

**Seven Steps
to Engaging
Hard-to-Reach
Communities**



*Southwest
Educational
Development
Laboratory*



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Introduction

Education research shows parents who take an active role in their child's education have a profound affect on student performance, drop out rates and attendance. But a 1998 study by the U.S. Department of Education shows schools in poor and minority neighborhoods see less parent and community involvement.

The reasons behind the lack of parental involvement in these communities are complex. Parents juggle competing demands and work long hours, at times holding down two jobs. Some parents don't attend community forums because they have no transportation or can't afford a babysitter. Still other parents question whether these forums are a good use of their time. They wonder whether their opinion counts and if their suggestions will be used to improve schools. Language barriers also get in the way. Parents may worry that their limited English will hinder participation or understanding.

Recruiting parents—any parent—is tough work. This step-by-step guide is designed for community organizers—educators, civic leaders and anyone else—interested in involving more parents and community members from different socioeconomic and minority backgrounds in conversations about improving public schools.

In 1999, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) interviewed leaders from Hispanic, African-American, Native American and Asian communities in Arkansas and Oklahoma to understand what keeps parents and others from participating in community forums. These leaders are experienced community organizers who reflect different segments of the community: churches, social services agencies, schools, government, advocacy groups and others.

As part of this effort, SEDL staff members observed a series of meetings in both states called Study Circles (see page 6 for an explanation of Study Circles). SEDL interviewed participants and community organizers afterward about effective public engagement strategies including how to increase participation among parents from low socioeconomic and diverse backgrounds.

After conducting more than fifty interviews and reviewing literature on recruitment, SEDL developed seven steps to help organizers have meaningful conversations about public education that include more representation from today's culturally diverse communities.

This guide is about the heavy-lifting that comes with good organizing. It offers advice on how to:

- Know your community
- Identify the issues
- Designate facilitators
- Train facilitators
- Recruit participants
- Locate a meeting site and handle logistics
- Follow-up with participants

Is this guide for you?

This guide is designed for readers who want to increase the involvement of hard-to-reach parents and community members in public education. You may be a parent, a community advocate, an educator or a local business owner. No matter what your role or vocation, you care about the quality of public education. You want to ensure that schools set high expectations of all children. And, you know how critical public engagement is to these efforts.

This guide will walk you through the basics of building support for schools by engaging all members of your community with special emphasis on culturally and linguistically diverse individuals. It is not meant to be the definitive piece on organizing, but a helpful reference guide—one we hope you will keep nearby and use often. For organizations that offer training on public engagement formats, refer to *Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity*.

A Note from SEDL

Building Support for Better Schools is the second in a series of publications produced by SEDL's Diversity in Dialogue project. This project focuses on how to engage culturally and linguistically diverse members of the community in the decisions affecting public education.

SEDL wishes to thank Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools, a program sponsored and coordinated in Arkansas and Oklahoma. Study Circles welcomed SEDL to attend meetings and interview participants, facilitators and community organizers—all of whom offered candid reflections and practical advice highlighted in this report. SEDL also interviewed additional community organizers with close ties to minority populations in Oklahoma and Arkansas.

The Diversity in Dialogue project wishes to thank: the Study Circles Resource Center, Arkansas Friends for Better Schools, the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma, the Center for Research on Teaching and Learning at the University of Arkansas, Dr. Shernaz Garcia and Dr. Alicia Betsinger of the University of Texas at Austin, and SEDL's Policy Planning Service.

Getting Started

Think for a moment about the last community forum or meeting you organized on an issue related to school improvement. How well represented were all segments of your community? Did you consider the participation of extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles who help raise children in many minority homes? How effective were your recruitment strategies? In what ways did you follow-up with parents and community members after the meeting?

The answers to these questions become increasingly important as schools across the country grow more racially and ethnically diverse. For years, minority populations were concentrated in border states like California, New Mexico and Texas and in urban areas like New York, Chicago and Boston. Now, demographic

How do you define diversity?

There is no one definition. Diversity means different things to different people. For some, it may mean reaching out to people of diverse cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds. For others, diversity may mean reaching deeper into one segment of the community; for example, a combination of recent immigrants and older, more established residents. Both definitions are accurate.

What matters is understanding how you and your fellow organizers think about diversity and how that thinking shapes planning and recruitment for a community conversation about improving schools. Identifying some commonly held definitions about diversity will help you take a more unified approach to building community support, identifying issues or recruiting participants.

shifts require organizers to think more critically about how to engage culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the decisions affecting public schools.

This engagement is significant because efforts to improve public education have more staying power when they are supported and understood by parents and community mem-

bers. Failing to involve all community members in decisions affecting public education often results in distrust, leading to apathy on one hand, or confrontation on the other.

What SEDL has learned from interviewing organizers, parents and community members is that obstacles to parent and community involvement can be overcome, but building greater participation requires an understanding of how culture, socioeconomic status and other factors influence parent and community participation. You must earn the trust of minority communities that have traditionally felt shut out of the decisions affecting their children and their neighborhood schools.

Ways to Bring People Together

Here are four examples of how to engage parents and community members in conversations about schools. You may want to use these approaches together or independent of each other.



Forums

A forum attracts anywhere from 30–200 people and typically meets once to discuss a single issue. A community forum lasts about two hours and is led by a facilitator who focuses the discussion and ensures all voices are heard.

For more information about forums, contact the National Issues Forums Institute in Dayton, Ohio at 800-433-7834 or the Public Agenda Foundation in New York, New York at 212/686-6610.

Study Circles

A study circle involves parents, community members and advocates, business and religious leaders, and educators and students who arrive at a decision about an issue or a problem through discussion. Study circles are typically made up of ten to fifteen people who meet weekly for two hours over four weeks. A facilitator guides the discussion and asks questions, drawing in different points of view. During the final session, the group decides what can be done about the issue.

Who's a Cultural Expert?

A cultural expert might be a school counselor, the neighborhood grocer, a minister or a social service provider. They know the history of minority groups in their community and understand how they relate to public schools, social service agencies and community groups. Some cultural experts are high profile. They sit on boards or hold positions of leadership or head up community organizations. Others may not be as high profile, but have deep ties to their community, as well as credibility. They are tuned into issues confronting the neighborhood and are well-connected.

Q: Do organizers have to become cultural experts?

A: To some degree, yes. Effective organizers are knowledgeable and responsive to cultural differences. The main thing is knowing who to turn to for help in understanding customs and norms.

For more information, contact the Study Circles Resource Center in Promfret, Connecticut at 860-928-2616.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are designed to gauge how different audiences view an issue. Information gathered from several focus groups discussing a single topic is used to craft community forums, public policy or written materials. Typically, focus groups are held over two days on one topic. Each group is asked the same questions in the same order. Some focus groups are followed by a community forum.

For more information about focus groups, contact the Public Agenda Foundation in New York, New York at 212-686-6610 or the Institute for Responsive Education in Boston, Massachusetts at 617-373-2595.

Citizens Jury™

The Citizens Jury™ brings together citizens representative of the community to examine an issue and pronounce judgement. The jury arrives at a solution after discussing expert testimony and listening to recommendations. A jury is made up of twelve to twenty-four citizens. The entire process lasts up to five days. This approach was conceived by the Jefferson Center for the New Democratic Process which provides moderators who oversee deliberations.

For more information, contact the Jefferson Center for the New Democratic Process in Minneapolis, Minnesota at 612-926-3292.

If you would like to learn more about these approaches to engaging parents and community members, please see *Public Deliberations: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity* published by SEDL. This publication is available on our Web site at www.sedl.org/pubs.

Engaging Parents & Community Members

Seven Steps for Success



step one

Know Your Community

You have just learned that your local school board is crafting a comprehensive plan proposing major reforms. The plan is far-reaching and the implications are great. School board members are eager to gather community input and they want your help. How will you engage all segments of your community in the conversation? Where will you begin?

Knowing your community is critical. Your efforts to engage all segments of your community should be just as far-reaching as the “proposed” reform agenda. But too often organizers limit their outreach efforts to schools, churches, governmental agencies or youth groups. This is a good start, but organizers are missing a bigger

These agencies and organizations can help identify less visible community groups that have stronger ties to culturally diverse and minority neighborhoods:

Religious Organizations, Churches and Temples

Neighborhood Centers

Arts and Cultural Foundations

School Staff (bilingual coordinators, counselors and community counselors)

Social Service Agencies

City Council

State and Local Government Commissions

Libraries

Red Cross

Camp Fire Boys and Girls

Chambers of Commerce

Rotary Clubs

African-American Sororities

Senior Citizens Centers

Seek Out Established Coalitions

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In Tulsa, the Coalition of Hispanic Organizations talks regularly about the issues facing the Hispanic community. Members include Catholic and Protestant churches, service organizations, a Hispanic commission formed by city council, a local cultural and arts foundation and a Hispanic education group. Many of these groups have outreach programs that have strong and extensive ties to Hispanic neighborhoods. Work with similar coalitions in your community.

opportunity to cast a wider net. Experienced organizers start with these leads to identify less visible community groups that have a deeper reach into culturally diverse and minority neighborhoods. True community engagement begins here.

For example, many business and community groups are affiliated with minority and ethnic organizations. The local Chamber of Commerce typically has ties to the Asian, Hispanic or Native American Chambers of Commerce. National advocacy groups will help put you in touch with local affiliates or leaders. Some examples of national groups include the National Advancement for



A Checklist

SEDL attended several Study Circle meetings to gather research for this publication. While participants and organizers liked the process and were eager to participate again, they shared candid observations with SEDL about improving community outreach. These observations spoke volumes about their commitment to meaningful public engagement.

After one Study Circle session, some expressed concern that only middle income community members had attended the meeting. Organizers and participants agreed that they needed to do a better job engaging participants from other socioeconomic levels. As they brainstormed ideas, they crafted this checklist of guiding questions:

- Which leaders in our community can best connect us to groups that work with minority and low income parents, residents and others?
- In what ways will we ensure these leaders and organizations are involved early on?
- What considerations—time, expense, outreach efforts—must be made to accommodate participants?

Colored People, La Raza Unida (a national advocacy group for the Hispanic community), the Asian American Arts Alliance or the Native American Cultural Society (a nonprofit group committed to educating people about the Native American culture).

Another good source is local cultural groups or museums that concentrate on preserving native language, customs and traditions (see box on page 9). Not only can these groups help recruit parents to discuss school reform efforts, but they can help break down cultural or language barriers along the way. Think of them as your cultural experts—knowledgeable leaders who can deepen your knowledge and increase outreach to members of different communities.

Community and recreation centers that offer after school tutoring, English classes, career counseling, job placement or citizenship

“In Native American communities, you must include the elders as an important group that gives their permission and support.”

—Lillian Williams, Resource Advisor,
Indian Education Program

classes are another valuable resource. These centers are a good way to promote upcoming community meetings and attract new participants.

Building community support for increased public involvement requires legwork and know how. The results, however, are invaluable. Ensuring parents and community members of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds participate early in school conversations not only broadens the diversity of opinion, but cements relationships over time. When done well, minority parents are an integral part of the decision-making process affecting public education, not just an afterthought.

A local museum can offer links to the past and the present.

The Heritage Museum of Falfurrias, Texas is a regional museum that informs about Mexican and Spanish culture and heritage. It was organized in 1965 and has 456 members located in the southern part of the state. Its mission is to tell about the local customs, music, food and cultural celebrations and to chronicle the area's past. The members of the museum are active in this ranching community and represent many generations of families living in the area since the 1700s.



step two

Identify the Issues

The more organizers know about the education issues important to minority and culturally diverse communities, the more successful they are in recruiting parents and community members. Why? Because they can then design community forums with those issues in mind. This may seem obvious, but too often agendas are designed without learning what parents and community members want to talk about most, virtually guaranteeing low turnout. For example, you may want to hold a meeting about a proposal to increase funding for schools, but the community wants to talk about the drop out rate. How do you identify the issues your community cares about most? The answer is simple: ask your community.

Organizers interviewed by SEDL say they learn first hand about local issues. They are good listeners. They ask questions, probing for clarity and understanding. They reach out to all types of people, from a well-known community leader to a neighborhood grandmother. They set aside the time it takes to research issues in-depth.

In addition to talking one-on-one with community members, here are some more ideas to help identify which education issues matter most:

Listen to Your Community

Ask parents about their attitudes toward their child's school. Ask them if their child is interested in learning. Is their child receiving a good education? Why or why not? Do teachers talk with families about their child's progress? Talk about these issues one-on-one or

“In our community, topics of interest have to do with moral teaching and character development.”

-Tom Kung, Principal, The Chinese School

in small, informal gatherings or during community group meetings.

Listening closely to what parents and community members say can help organizers identify pressing issues and learn why some parents are not more involved in efforts to improve schools. Parents may feel they have no say in school reform and meetings focused on these issues are a waste of time. Respond to parents' concerns by holding public forums that address their issues. Slowly, you build trust and cement relationships.

Attend Meetings of Community Groups

One of the most effective ways of gathering information is to attend meetings of groups representing different community, cultural and minority interests. Learn more about the



issues and how perspectives about public education vary from one group to another. These groups provide an avenue to conduct formal or informal surveys. They can open up doors for meaningful community conversations. Above all, keep these groups informed of your work and next steps. Regular follow-up and personal contact keeps these groups actively involved.

Visit Schools

Often staff members at a local school can help identify leaders in the community. They also know first hand about the challenges facing their school and others in the neighborhood. Talk to teachers, principals, counselors, bilingual specialists and students about issues the school is grappling with. These issues may become the centerpiece of future community forums.

Drop in at Work Sites and Community Gathering Places

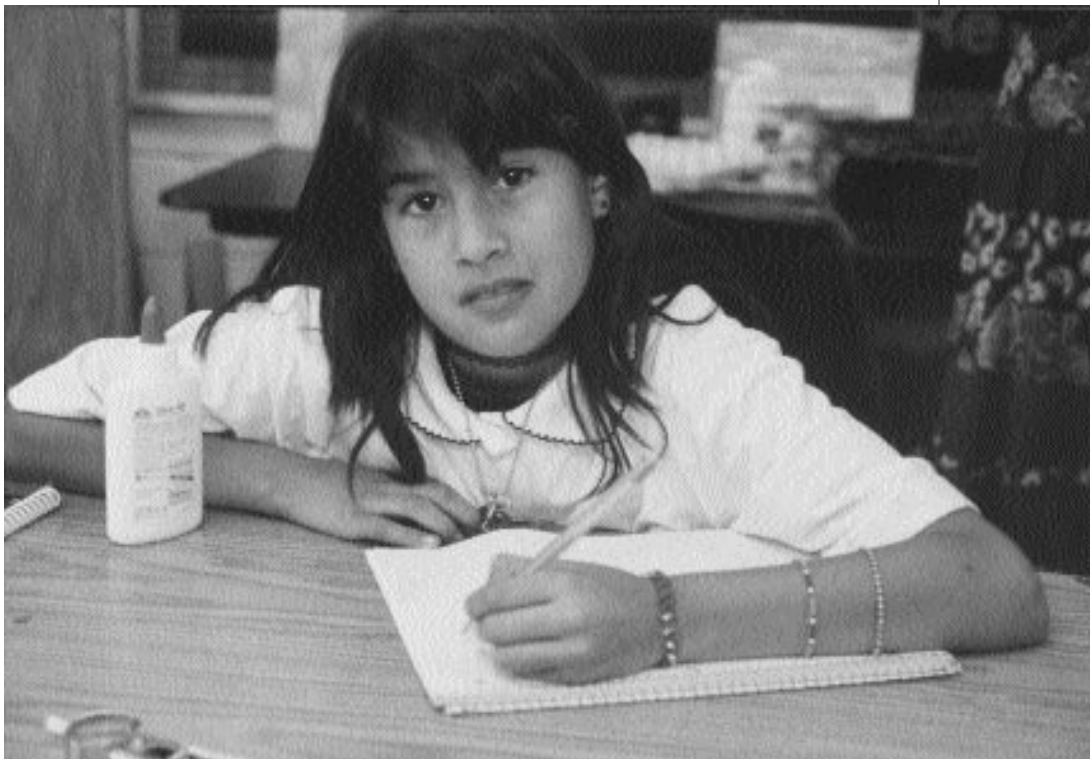
Learning about the education issues confronting a community requires going directly to the source. Arrange with owners of local businesses to meet with employees on the job during lunch or work breaks. Find out what's on their minds. Ask questions. Gather input. Consider holding a neighborhood coffee or a Saturday breakfast meeting for community members. Ask people what they think about schools and how they would improve them.

Regardless of where or how you talk to people, remember why you are there: to learn about their concerns. A strong grasp of the issues confronting a community provides the backbone for a successful public forum. Parents, community members and business leaders want to know that the time they have spent with you will lead to something concrete—a solution, a follow-up activity or action. Failing to explain how their input will be used often makes it more difficult to attract parents and community members to future meetings where important decisions are made about the schools their children attend.

“Find out the real issues. Educating students is important. Some Native American families here are interested in knowing more about how to enroll children in technical schools and job placement. They are interested in what is best for the family, preserving cultural values and succeeding in life.”

—Dannette McIntosh, Co-Chair,
Mayor’s Commission on Indian Affairs

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step three

Designate Facilitators

Since you've gotten to know your community and the issues people care about, the next step is finding the right people to facilitate what can be tough conversations about how to improve public education.

The hard work of identifying facilitators grows easier as organizers establish relationships with neighborhood groups representing different ethnic, cultural and community interests. Approach leaders of civic, religious or minority organizations who are respected, credible and fair. The only agenda facilitators should carry with them to a public forum is a strong desire to ensure that all participants are heard.

While you are meeting with community groups, agencies, churches and cultural organizations (see Step 1: Knowing Your Community), ask for referrals. Be sure to explain the facilitator's role, time commitment and what training will be offered. Community advocates also can advise you of any cultural or language do's and don'ts as you recruit facilitators. Ask those who provide names if they would consider calling the person on your

Recruit Respected Community Members

- **Religious leader**
- **Parent**
- **Local grocer**
- **Block leader**
- **Neighborhood Watch captain**
- **Housing project resident**

Get Personal

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The key to successful recruitment is personal contact. If the person you want to participate in a community meeting is extraordinarily busy, forget sending an invitation letter or a phone call. Make a personal appeal. Explain what contribution you want the person to make and why you value his or her involvement.

—Advice from a minister

behalf. This early introduction lays the groundwork for your follow-up call.

Armed with a list of potential facilitators, contact each person and explain who you are and who made the recommendation. Provide background about what education issue is being discussed and why you think this person is well suited to facilitate a community discussion. Schedule a time to meet in person and take along an information packet about the event and training (see Step 4: Training Facilitators). Follow-up with a confirmation letter.

If a person is designated who has never facilitated a group, assure them they will co-facilitate with someone they know. This will help ease anxiety—anxiety that can prompt someone to say no.

Seek out facilitators who speak languages reflective of the community, whether it's Spanish or Vietnamese or a Native American language. A bilingual facilitator will help put participants at ease and improve the quality of the conversation. If a bilingual facilitator is not available, arrange for interpreters.



Here's why this hard work pays off: parents, community members and others are much more likely to participate if they know who is organizing and leading the discussion. They might attend church together on Sundays or have children enrolled in the same school or live on the same block. Choosing the right facilitator can mean the difference between just another school meeting and a more productive conversation about children and learning.

Who's a Leader?

A former principal in Arkansas interviewed by SEDL said her best ally was an active grandmother who has close ties to families in the community. In this Hispanic and African-American community, this grandmother is viewed as an authority figure and wields a great deal of influence in her neighborhood. The grandmother helps the principal identify community leaders and get the word out about school meetings and events, resulting in strong community participation.





step four

Train Facilitators

You've identified facilitators. The next step is training them with extra attention to language, culture and other considerations. The most artful facilitators are sensitive to these issues and, consequently, develop trust with participants more quickly than facilitators who are not. Training facilitators well in how to be aware of cultural and language barriers and the history of minority communities can make the difference between success and failure as groups come together for the first time.

The strategies highlighted next are designed to enhance good facilitation training.

Know Your Audience

While knowing your audience is critical to the success of any community forum or discussion, it's more critical for facilitators working with parents, community members and others from different cultural backgrounds. The more facilitators acquaint themselves with their participant's needs, the more meaningful the discussion.

Here's a checklist of questions to consider:

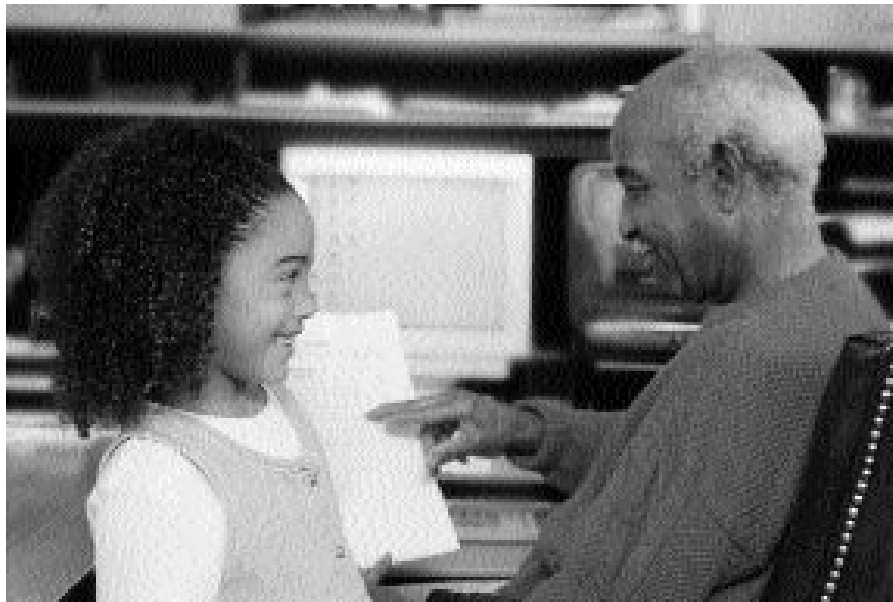
- Which community members are likely to participate in the discussion?
- What languages do they speak?
- Are there cultural barriers to overcome?
- Will traditions or customs dictate where or how people want to sit during the meeting?
- Will extra time be needed for interpretation?

- Is audio equipment required to help overcome language differences?
- Have considerations been made for nonreaders?

Welcome Participants

Good facilitators welcome and introduce themselves to every participant. This may seem painfully obvious, but a flurry of activity takes place before a community conversation and this most important step is often overlooked. This step is critical because this sets the tone for the entire meeting. It can affect the comfort level of participants and the quality of the conversation.

SEDL staff who attended Study Circle meetings observed participants entering a room and standing alone, unsure and uncomfortable. After a quick hello they were on their own — not because facilitators were unfeeling, uncaring people, but because they were caught up in pre-meeting logistics. Take care of the logistics early on, so that when participants arrive, you can concentrate on them. Consider assigning community leaders solely to the job of welcoming participants. You may want to have one to three designated



Check out *At-Risk Families and Schools Becoming Partners* by Lynn Balster Lontos published in 1992 by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. Chapters 22-25 offer important and in-depth insights on engaging immigrant, Asian, African-American and Hispanic families in school-related activities. The book may be found online at <http://eric.uoregon.edu/pdf/books/atriskfs.pdf>.

greeters, maybe more if the group is large. And, if you are unsure how to pronounce a person's name as you greet them, ask an interpreter to help you.

Meeting Site

Allow participants time to become familiar with the meeting site. Point out where participants can park. If transportation is provided, make sure participants know where to meet the driver when the meeting ends. Show them where they can make a telephone call or use the restroom. If childcare is available, introduce participants to the caretaker before the meeting and let them know they can visit their children any time during the meeting. This will help ease concerns for parents who are not used to being separated from their children and rely on extended family when they are apart.

Understanding Cultural Influences

Accepted practices vary from one culture to the next. In some cultures, a handshake or direct eye contact with an authority figure is frowned upon. In other cultures, individuals stand just a little more than a foot apart when they speak to each other. Still other cultures see this as an invasion of personal space. Keep these cultural differences in mind as you greet participants and involve them in the discussion. Talk to a local cultural expert to learn what's acceptable and what's not.

Nonverbal Behavior

Sometimes it's not what we say, but how we respond physically that makes the greatest impression. Smiling and listening closely are nonverbal communication strategies that put participants at ease and show respect for their contribution to the conversation.

Be aware that nodding, within some cultures, indicates politeness and respect rather than agreement. Other cultures see silence as an important nonverbal strategy feeling it is not necessary to talk all the time in a conversation. However, too long a silence by the facilitator during a conversation between two individuals may not be viewed as appropriate. Again, the local cultural experts can offer both knowledge and suggestions for making community conversations comfortable for all involved.



step five

Recruit Participants

Recruitment can make or break the success of any community forum or public discussion. Here are some strategies from experienced organizers worth considering.

Make Personal Contact

Enlist community members who are respected and valued in the community to help promote a public forum by word-of-mouth. One of the best recruiters might be a local parent who is well known and liked by the parents of children who attend a neighborhood school. Another good source is a local minister or priest who can recruit his or her congregation. Post a list of neighborhood recruiters with the most up-to-date contact information so that you can call on them when necessary.

Let People Know What to Expect

It's important to explain what you hope to accomplish during the discussion. Do you want ideas from the community on how to improve schools? Do you want feedback on whether parents think

Finding the Right Person

While planning a local multicultural festival, a committee member recalled that members of the Asian community did not participate the previous year. After making several phone calls, she located a leader in the Asian community well suited to help with recruitment. As a result, the Asian community was the largest group participating in the festival's parade.

“Parents and community members are not going to come and just talk. They need to see the ultimate benefit: How is this going to affect my child at school?”

—*Reverend Victor Orta, director,
Baptist Hispanic Ministries for Eastern Oklahoma*

a proposed school improvement effort is a good idea? Do you want to measure parents’ attitudes about public schools? Participants will want to know what their role is during the discussion. This will help them decide whether it’s worth their time.

Identify the Best Media Sources

Local community leaders are best equipped to help organizers identify print, radio and television outlets with target audiences of ethnic and minority groups. Consider asking a Spanish-speaking radio or tv station to run public service announcements promoting a community forum. Ask the editor of a neighborhood newspaper designed for African-American or Asian readers to consider running an article or inserting a flier in the newspaper. Approach the publisher of a free community newsletter to help spread the word about an upcoming event.

Say What You Mean

One organizer in Oklahoma told SEDL that the phrase “Study Circle” conjured up images for unknowing participants of studying and doing homework.

Consequently, some people didn’t attend. Next time, the organizer will use different wording to more clearly convey what’s expected of participants.

How to Promote the Meeting

Invite minority groups to help design materials

Community outreach staff who work with religious groups, human service agencies or schools can provide pointers on creating promotional fliers, newsletters or brochures. Materials should also be in forms other than print for those who cannot read or write. Ideas include videos, public service announcements or word-of-mouth invitations.

Ask community leaders for help with language

Ask leaders for advice on the best way to word fliers, brochures or newsletters for a specific audience.

Translate materials in different languages

If you are recruiting members of a Vietnamese-speaking community, print fliers in Vietnamese. If you are recruiting Native Americans, print materials in their languages. Simple, right? Well, not always. Some ethnic groups have more than one language. For example, there are more than 500 Native American languages. Since many indigenous languages are not written, promoting recruitment by word-of-mouth instead of print form may need to be considered. Be aware of the different languages and dialects in your community.

Keep it simple

If a sixth grader can't understand what you've written, it's too complicated. Avoid education jargon.

“Word of mouth is important. Keep sending reminders. Use telephone chains to recruit. Pre-register people at church. I discourage sending notes home with students.”

*—James Robinson, operations director
of a metropolitan ministry*

Place Fliers Throughout the Community

Survey community leaders and find out where parents, community members and others congregate. Go there. Leaflet restaurants,

churches, temples, restaurants, neighborhood grocery stores, mini-marts, billboards, popular national discount chains, laundromats, community centers, farmers' markets and other locations. Pass out fliers at local festivals celebrating Diez y Seis de Septiembre, Juneteenth, Chinese New Year and other cultural and ethnic holidays.



Put It in Your Community's Words

One community leader, who works for the Red Cross and raises awareness among Native Americans about AIDS, likens community forums to “talking circles,” a Native American custom. This custom involves members of a group passing a talking stick from one person to the next. Whoever holds the stick, speaks. Each person takes a turn sharing their thoughts. The community leader says it’s an effective way to involve everyone in the conversation.



step six

Locate a Meeting Site & Handle Logistics

Choosing a Meeting Site

Where you hold your community forum matters. Some participants may feel more comfortable in informal locations, like someone's home or a neighborhood restaurant. Other participants with strong religious convictions may think meeting in a church or temple is inappropriate. Still others are at home in these settings. Some participants may have concerns about meeting in a governmental building, fearing contact with immigration officials.

These considerations may leave organizers asking: "Well, where should we meet?"

The bottom line is: know your community. The fact is any one of the options above may work well, it's just knowing which one is a good fit. Enlist community leaders to help identify the most appropriate meeting locations. Canvass the neighborhood for good locations and ask leaders for ideas. Neutral places such as a community or recreation center may work best.

Other issues to think about include the safety of participants. Is the designated meeting site in a safe area? If not, could it be made safer? Also be sure the location is close to where participants live, and has access to public transportation. Provide transportation if the meeting site is not on a bus line. If you are planning a city-wide community forum, identify transportation strategies that ensure all segments of the community can attend and are well-represented.

The Logistics

Logistics largely cover meeting times, transportation, childcare and food.

Setting meeting times largely depends on the community. Find out what works best for participants. Consider holding a series of meetings on the same issue at different times to accommodate as many family and community members as possible. Learn which cultural celebrations, religious observances and holidays conflict with meeting times.

Lack of transportation continues to hinder the involvement of many low-income, minority parents and community members. Is public transportation available? If not, arrange for private transportation, car pooling or “walking pools” which involves groups of neighbors who walk together to an event.

Many of the organizers interviewed by SEDL stressed the importance of providing child care. Let participants know ahead of time whether on-site childcare will be provided.

Refreshments, including food native to participants’ cultural backgrounds, is a good ice breaker. And, often participants don’t have an opportunity to eat or grab a snack before they attend a community meeting.

Sometimes a school is not the best place to hold a community conversation, especially if parents have had bad experiences in the past:

“Parents say—‘They (teachers and school personnel) don’t like us. I don’t want my kids in a school where I am not wanted.’”

*—Community organizer with
the National Association for the Advancement
of Colored People, Arkansas*

Other ideas from successful organizers

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- **Kick off the session with a well-known speaker, a children's performance or some other form of entertainment**
- **Take advantage of existing meetings. For example, if the local Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is holding its annual meeting, ask leaders if they would be willing to carve out two hours either before or after the meeting for a forum about schools**
- **Hold a raffle after the meeting and give away door prizes, perhaps a free trip to the zoo or a gift certificate to a local restaurant.**



step seven

Follow-up with Participants

Let's fast forward for a moment. Here's the scenario: Your community forum was a success. You saw high participation from parents, community members, business leaders and others from different minority and socioeconomic backgrounds. The event was well-promoted across the community—in churches, local restaurants, corner grocery stores and on local radio stations. Participants were engaged in the conversation because the discussion focused on the school issues that mattered most to them. All in all, it was a successful event. Your work is done.

Well, not quite.

There is one more critical step and it's often the one that is overlooked the most.

Participants who attended the discussion—and even those who could not—want information explaining what will happen next. They want to know what impact the discussion will have on improving public schools or how it will affect their child's education. They want to know that their opinion is not only valued but that the appropriate leaders are responding to their concerns.

Call or meet one-on-one with community and neighborhood groups who helped organize the event. Share next steps with leaders of culturally diverse organizations who can then share the information with their members. Write articles for school newsletters or community newspapers that summarize what issues were discussed and highlight next steps. Next steps might include an action plan, a report to the school board or intensive committee work.

You can also reinforce how much involvement is valued by demonstrating how you will build upon the issues raised by parents and



community members in future meetings. When that follow-up discussion does occur, effective facilitators start the meeting by summarizing the key issues raised in the previous meeting and set clear goals that build upon those issues rather than cover old ground. And, if there is to be another meeting, make sure that all participants have any needed information before they leave.

When this work is done well, it's more likely that future community meetings will attract broader interest and deeper commitment from participants.

Credibility Counts

“Credibility is very important. These groups have been exploited and lied to too much. You need to earn their trust and treat them with respect. Do not promise more than you can deliver. Always follow through on what you promised.”

—a minister who specializes in community outreach

Tell us about your experience:

We would like to hear from you about your experience recruiting parents and community members from different cultural, minority and socioeconomic backgrounds. What do you think works well? What would you do differently?

Please share your advice with us and we will post it on the SEDL Web site. If we get enough responses, we may publish them in a future booklet. Thank you for your contribution.

Name:

Title:

Organization:

Address:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Tell us a little about your experience as a community organizer.

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What strategies work best to recruit minority parents and community members?

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Please share an example of a successful recruitment strategy which illustrates one of the seven steps in this guidebook.

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Please send your comments by fax, email or mail to:

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Tulsa, Oklahoma Interviews

Ability Resources, Inc.
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 Cherokee Language and Culture
 Greater Tulsa Area Hispanic Affairs Commission
 Hispanic Action on Education
 Hispanic Ministries for Eastern Oklahoma
 Mayor's Commission on Indian Affairs
 Study Circle participants, facilitators and organizers
 Tulsa Chinese School
 Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry
 Tulsa Public Schools
 Tulsa Urban League

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma Interviews

Amos Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal
 City Council
 Delta Sigma Theta
 Latino Development Commission Agency
 Native American Services
 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
 Oklahoma City Public Schools
 Study Circle local organizer

North Little Rock, Arkansas Interviews

American Indian Center of Arkansas
 Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
 Civic League
 Mount Pleasant Baptist Church
 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
 North Little Rock Public Schools
 Rose City Community Center
 Study Circle participants, facilitators and organizers