



How to Get the School Board on Board

Answers to Common Questions and Concerns about Research

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INFORMATION MATTERS

How different could school districts be if they knew the answer to questions such as: where does our district rank in comparison to other schools; how have we improved in communicating with parents over the last five years; what are the priorities and issues of concern for the district to address according to the community? All of these questions can impact the future of school districts and decisions the district is facing.

Districts often gather information to answer these questions through various informal sources, such as e-mails, suggestion boxes, and board meetings, but many wish there was a more valid measure of how the district is doing.

It is common within the administration of school districts to identify what information the district already has, and what information needs to be collected. The needed information is often gathered through community meetings conducted by the district, rather than through surveying the greater community. Now the question becomes: *If we already offer opportunities for community feedback and communication, why is research necessary?*

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

Even though gathering community feedback through e-mails, drop boxes, and community meetings might be effective for a quick fix to a situation, those forms of feedback do not paint an accurate picture of perceptions and opinions in the community. While many valuable opinions are brought forth in these forms of feedback, these opinions generally come from community members with a vested interest in the school district, such as parents or staff members.

Gathering feedback through e-mails, drop boxes, and community meetings does have its place in school district planning, such as deciding what classes to offer, what to look for in a new superintendent, and what extra-curriculars to cut when money gets tight. The issues that are addressed through these informal methods of feedback should be those that affect only people with a vested interest in the district.

While qualitative community feedback serves a valuable purpose in improving educational institutions, it is also necessary to gather *quantitative* data of the greater community to ensure a school district is not only fulfilling its role to the students, but also its role in the greater community.

"There is a large difference in participation when you *ask someone* to participate versus when you *offer someone the opportunity* to participate."

For those issues facing the bigger community (such as a bond issue); it is not only important, but *necessary* to listen to the perceptions of the entire community. For that reason, scientifically conducted community research is very important in determining what to put on the ballot. A community survey can gather the opinions of parents and teachers, while also gathering the often unheard opinions of those who could potentially vote down an important bond issue.

A community meeting may make it seem as though a bond is strongly supported, but a surprise could come on election day if the opinions and perceptions of the greater community have not been taken into account. Similarly, a survey included in the district newsletter is not scientific because only people who receive and read the district newsletter would have an opportunity to participate in the survey. If the goal is information that represents the entire community, it is essential to use a scientific survey and sampling method.

A community survey can answer the questions that are essential for a school district to make informed decisions. A statistically representative survey reaches parents and community members across the district, to measure their support or to evaluate the district's progress. These surveys also provide an excellent opportunity for parents and community members to express their needs and concerns to the district. By asking parents and community members for their opinion, the school district reinforces its accountability and responsiveness to the community.

There is a large difference in participation when you *ask someone* to participate versus when you *offer someone the opportunity* to participate. School boards give people the opportunity to participate during public comments at their board meetings. Does everyone participate? Hardly - in most cases there is little to no public comment at board meetings unless there is a controversial issue. When you ask people to participate, for example using a telephone survey, then you get input from many people who would not have made the effort to speak at the school board meeting. Most people will gladly take a telephone survey about the school district, and the information provided will be information that you could not get any other way - even at a school board meeting.

A COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

This kind of formal information gathering can prove to be very valuable in planning for the future. A local school district conducted 40 community meetings to gather information necessary to rewrite a bond proposal after a first bond did not pass. After gathering informal feedback at these community meetings, a second bond proposal was written to reflect the opinions of those in attendance. Despite the amount of information gathered, the second bond proposal was voted down as well; as it did not reflect the opinions of the entire community. After the second defeat, the school district decided to conduct a community survey and uncover what issues were preventing the bond from being passed.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

It is important to note that many bonds are voted down not because of money, but because of other issues facing the school district. A community survey that focuses solely on whether or not the specific bond measure will pass misses several important factors that could cause a voter to answer a resound "no."

In order to get an accurate picture before an election, a school district must look at the deeper issues. Does the community have confidence in the school district? Does the community feel the school district is effective? Is the school district accountable with the money it already has from taxes? Is the school district justifying the need for the millage? A survey focusing solely on the passing of a bond issue misses several important issues that could cause a bond to be voted down.

In our experience, administrators can also relate to the issues and challenges that come about during the decision-making process to conduct research or select a consultant. Many administrators see the value in conducting formal research, but cannot justify the cost of a community survey. A tight budget year makes listening to the needs and concerns of parents and the community even more important.

REINFORCING A COMPREHENSIVE PERSPECTIVE

If budget constraints are going to force your district to trim communication efforts, for example, how do you know where the best place is to cut costs? In some school districts, the district newsletter is read by over 90% of parents and community members, which makes it a very effective form of communication. Is your district newsletter that effective - or would it be better to trim costs from the district web page? Without finding out about the needs and concerns of parents and the community, you are only guessing at what to cut - when knowing what to cut can pay for itself in making the most cost-effective and efficient decisions.

As an organization with several key players - parents, community members, staff and board - it is necessary for future planning to insure all voices are heard. The best information that can improve the community as a whole will prove to be worthwhile if the extra dime is spent for *accurate* information.

ABOUT PERSPECTIVES

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Perspectives Consulting Group, Inc. uses state-of-the-art market research techniques to obtain the information necessary to make efficient and effective decisions and plan for the future. Perspectives Consulting Group, Inc. offers a full-range of planning services including facilitated strategic planning, market assessment, and feasibility studies that are essential to succeed in today's marketplace.

Perspectives Consulting Group, Inc. was founded in 1987 by Gary M. Goscenski, Director of Consulting Services and Dr. Paul M. Lane, Senior Consultant and is located in Paw Paw, Michigan.

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