Welcome to the Great Conversation

Forget community involvement. Instead, educators should focus on building community support.

Jamie Vollmer

Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.

—*Abraham Lincoln*

I believe in strengthening the relationship between the public and public schools to increase student success; I'm skeptical, however, about increasing community involvement in our schools.

Community involvement is a laudable goal, and I respect those who devote their professional lives to the cause. My experiences in community involvement campaigns, however, have convinced me that the effort is all but futile. Few districts have the time, the resources, or even the inclination to conduct a comprehensive community involvement campaign. Most teachers and administrators are already up to their eyeballs in work, and, truth be told, many have zero interest in involving the public.



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Even when district leaders are willing to make the effort, the community's response is often anemic at best. Six months after the campaign begins, typically with great fanfare and excitement, all that remains is the original vertical team and a handful of loyal volunteers who slog along, with no reinforcements in sight.

Cynics attribute the weak public response to apathy: The public may talk a good game, but when it comes to actually becoming involved in our schools, we just don't care. But I've learned that the problem isn't apathy—it's time. Increasing community involvement is a great idea, but we're just too busy.

Don't get me wrong. I know we need something from the community to create the schools we need. No generation of educators has been asked to do what we now demand of our public schools—to teach all children to high levels while addressing the stunning array of social, psychological, and physical problems that plague so many of them.

Our schools' record of achievement is remarkable, but no matter how hard teachers and administrators work, they cannot fulfill society's enormous list of demands without addressing the four basics of public sentiment:

- *Community understanding.* The people of the community must have a basic understanding of why it's important to unfold the full potential of every child. They must also understand why it's necessary to change their schools to accomplish that goal.
- *Community trust.* The public must trust that the people working in their schools are knowledgeable, committed professionals who work in the best interests of their students and the community.
- *Community permission.* Schools are rooted in the culture of the community. Even modest changes can incite turmoil. Because the stakes are so high and the potential for backlash so great, we must secure the community's permission before we proceed.
- *Community support.* Schools cannot do it alone. The people of the community must join together to create a supportive learning environment dedicated to removing the obstacles to student success.



I call these basics the *prerequisites of progress*. And unlike community involvement, these prerequisites are something we can get.

Starting the Conversation

We can secure the prerequisites of progress through what I refer to as the *Great Conversation*. Districts across the United States are using this positive, ongoing discussion between educators and the public to strengthen support for local schools and raise student achievement.

For example, in the Adams 12 Five Star district north of Denver, Colorado, hundreds of people with and without children in school regularly participate with educators in this ongoing engagement process. The many accomplishments include the creation of a new districtwide alumni association mobilized to promote student success and the approval of a major bond referendum in the midst of the economic downturn—the most concrete expression of permission and support a district can get.

The school district of Beloit, Wisconsin, in partnership with the local economic development council, is using the Great Conversation to energize service clubs, faith-based organizations, and a host of nonprofits to work together to remove obstacles to student progress. Teachers, administrators, and business leaders report unprecedented levels of mutual trust.

In Kentucky's Christian County, pursuit of the Great Conversation has led to the creation of Partners in Education, which pairs businesses and community organizations with local schools to encourage student success in and out of school. Districts large and small are using the Great Conversation to gain increased public participation at school events, a deeper pool of volunteers, quality candidates for the school board, improved staff morale, and easier approval of funding requests in difficult times.

The action steps of the Great Conversation are powerful and practical. Most important, educators in any district—not just those favored by history, geography, or economics—can successfully implement them. No extra money, training, or personnel are required.

The process runs on two separate but synergistic tracks—one formal, the other informal. Each track can run in isolation, but they are most powerful when combined. Participation in either track must be voluntary, but broad participation of staff members ensures maximum results.

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The Informal Track

My primary focus here is the formal track. Of the informal track, I'll simply say that it's conducted by individual staff members within the course of their daily routines. Without adding to their workload, staff members can help secure the prerequisites of progress by taking four easy steps: stop bad-mouthing one another and their schools in public; shift their attention from the negative to the positive; regularly share something positive about their students, schools, and coworkers with the people in their social networks; and casually monitor their contribution. This last step might be as simple as recalling weekly the number of times they've shared something positive about their school with their neighbors and friends.

As this process unfolds and more staff members add their voices to the informal track, hundreds of positive impulses begin to move across a web of overlapping personal networks like ripples on a pond. Soon the entire community is enlivened with good news about their schools, energizing everyone in the process.

The Formal Track

Unlike the informal track, the formal track of the Great Conversation is a group activity. It's usually initiated and maintained at the district level, but it can be implemented by an individual school or a cluster of neighboring schools.

The centerpiece of the process is a scripted message developed by participants and approved by senior management (see "A Six-Point Script for Phase 1"). The message evolves over time in a series of phases that last three to six months each. I favor using Phase 1 to explain the goals of the Great Conversation and showcase examples of district, student, and staff success.

The central feature of Phase 2 is the

A Six-Point Script for Phase 1

This script works well with diverse audiences and covers six main points.

1. Welcome the audience.

Presenters introduce themselves and welcome the audience to the beginning of the Great Conversation, a new community-wide discussion designed to increase student success and improve the quality of life of everyone in the community, whether or not they have kids in school.

2. Establish a sense of urgency.

The demise of the industrial age has changed what all students need to know and be able to do to prosper as adults. As a result, it's in everyone's interest to work with their schools to remove barriers to student success. Presenters explain that higher levels of student success will have a salutary effect on crime rates, health services, tax revenues, civic participation, the strength of the local economy, and the quality of local government.

3. Share good news.

Presenters feature a few concrete examples of student achievement, staff excellence, and district milestones. Accounts of good news are like injections of a powerful antibiotic specially formulated to combat the virulent strains of public cynicism.

4. Explain the need for restructuring schools.

Presenters explain that the U.S. school system was created to select and sort students into two groups—thinkers and doers—according to the needs of an agro-industrial society that no longer exists. To prepare all students to succeed in the knowledge age, we must make significant changes in the basic building blocks of the system.

5. Make it clear that schools cannot do it alone.

Presenters make it clear that their schools cannot meet society's demands and unfold the full potential of every child without the help of the entire community. From an initial focus on civic values and cultivating basic skills in reading, writing, and math, public schools have broadened their curriculum over the past century to include a dizzying array of programs. Schools need community support to successfully prepare children for their multifaceted lives beyond school.

6. Conclude with one amazing fact.

Amazing facts are school-related statistics that educators may take for granted but that the community may find extraordinary. My personal favorite is how much money a kindergarten teacher would make if he or she were paid the same amount that an average day-care provider charges for the same number of hours for the same number of kids ($680 per child per month[1] x 9 months x 25 children = $153,000). The amazing fact exercise helps community members grasp the enormity of the task facing our schools and reinforces the need for understanding and support.

Be sure to end with a Q & A: The public will reject the process if it appears to be no more than a disguised attempt to gain public approval for decisions that have already been made. Presenters must provide bona fide opportunities for people to respond with their questions, opinions, and insights.

[1]National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. (2009). *2008 price of child care.* Arlington, VA: Author. Retrieved from www.naccrra.org/randd/docs/2008_Price_of_Child_Care.pdf

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link between the quality of local schools and the ongoing health and vitality of the community. Each succeeding phase looks to the desired goal: an active community-wide commitment to increasing student success.

The most important feature of the formal track is its venue. It takes place on the community's turf at the community's convenience. This stands in sharp contrast to the traditional approach to public engagement, which most often involves inviting the public to attend meetings held in the evening at the school. The response to this approach is predictable: an audience of the same 12 parents and the one weirdo who comes to all the meetings. The challenges facing our schools today demand that the conversation extends to the entire community. We must go to them.

The structure of the formal track has seven components.

1. Map the community.

To carry our message to the people of the community on their turf at their convenience, we must create a map. Mapping the community's turf has little to do with defining physical boundaries. We're interested in mapping people, and we're generally more interested in groups than in individuals.

Our goal in mapping is threefold: First, to identify all the groups that regularly or periodically gather in the community; second, to determine when and where they meet; and third, to organize the groups into categories. The number of categories will vary with the size and complexity of the community, but typical categories include civic clubs and organizations, fraternal societies, professional associations, labor and farm organizations, ethnic societies, businesses over a certain size, and all local religious institutions.

Mapping is easiest and most enjoyable when done in a half-day workshop that includes the entire staff and a cross-section of community members. Adding community members is especially important in those places where staff members don't adequately reflect the district's diversity.

The group can create a functional *conversation map* in under two hours. I have seen easels placed around the room holding newsprint pads. Each pad displays a single category heading, for example, Civic Clubs. The assembled mapmakers move from station to station, adding their ideas to the list. I have also been in settings where teams of participants independently create category lists at their tables. Facilitators then collect and merge all the lists to create a master map. No matter how it's done, the goal is to produce a comprehensive map of where the people of the community congregate by tapping the collective knowledge of all participants.

The formal track of the Great Conversation takes place on the community's turf at the community's convenience.

2. Decide on the message.

The primary objective of the Great Conversation is to move community members along a continuum from confusion and suspicion to understanding and trust, from obstruction and indifference to permission and support. To realize this objective, the message we share must contain four basic elements:

- *We must give people concrete, practical reasons to feel good about their schools.* Sharing good news helps community members see their schools for what they are: engines of growth and opportunity.
- *We must create a sense of urgency.* We must tell the public why it's essential to unfold the full potential of every child and why our schools must continue to improve if we are to achieve this goal.
- *We must help all members of the community understand why it's in their interest to have great local schools.* Audience members must understand that their quality of life is directly tied to the quality of their schools. Community members will not rally to our aid unless we help them connect the dots.
- *We must make it clear that we seek an open, honest exchange of information and ideas.* This commitment must be genuine. Staff members may feel tentative at first—past encounters with community members may have made them wary—but as long as we start with good intentions and remain consistent in our efforts to listen and connect, eventually all parties will lower their shields, and cooperative relationships can begin to grow.

3. Develop a script.

Once participants have developed the message, they need to distill their thoughts into a written script. Good scripts provide structure, inspire confidence, and help presenters stay on message. Using scripts also ensures that every audience will hear the same message at approximately the same time.

There is no perfect script, but the best are flexible enough to accommodate

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meetings of varying lengths, never assume that the audience has prior knowledge of the topic, are scrupulously stripped of jargon, and encourage audience feedback.

4. Build teams.
Teams, not individual presenters, carry the message to the community. Although almost any group of two to four people can form an effective team, I favor teams composed primarily of willing teachers and staff members. Administrators and board members can and should participate in the process, but it's better if they're not presenters. Polls indicate that teachers inspire more trust among audiences than administrators or board members do. Also, having new faces represent the school creates interest and raises audience receptivity.

5. Conduct a communications audit.
In an effort to reach everyone in the community, educators need to create an inventory of all the ways that the district (or school) "talks" to the public, both directly and indirectly. Most channels are obvious—for example, websites, newsletters, e-mails, newspaper columns, and public-access cable. Others are not, but they can be used to advance the cause.

For example, the physical appearance of district facilities sends a powerful signal to the public about pride and discipline that can intensify the community's sense of ownership. The amount and quality of student work displayed throughout the community give the public information about academic rigor and the strength of the curriculum. Inviting community members to shadow a teacher or an administrator for a day can foster trust and appreciation. Every communications tool at the district's disposal can be used to reinforce the message of the formal track.



Schools are rooted in the culture of the community.

6. Create a presentation schedule.
We define the community's turf when we create our map. We conform to the community's convenience when we schedule our teams to make their presentations when and where the people of the community normally congregate.

The process is straightforward. Call the designated contacts, explain the Great Conversation and its goals, and request an opportunity to make a presentation at one of their scheduled meetings at their earliest convenience. With each call, whether it be to the Rotary Club, the garden club, or the Ministerial Alliance, explain that this presentation is the first in an ongoing series focused on the topic of increasing student success and strengthening the community. This announcement places everyone on notice that something new has begun and that more will follow.

Engaging community members on their turf at their convenience may seem unwieldy. But the logistical control we surrender is vastly outweighed by the control we gain over the behavior of the audience, the flow of our message, and the tone and quality of the feedback.

7. Launch Phase 1.
We launch Phase 1 by having the teams make their first presentations. By offering our message and soliciting feedback, we begin to dive deep into the community's cultural matrix and confront public perceptions with professional reality. As each phase progresses and we return again and again to meet with all the disparate groups, understanding, trust, permission, and support grow. The people of the community begin to act as partners in the most important enterprise of our time: moving our schools and students from where they are to where they need to be.

Taking the First Step

Every district, rich or poor, regardless of location, already has the personnel, expertise, and resources it needs to execute the Great Conversation and reap its rewards. This approach can remove obstacles to student achievement, reduce staff and community resistance to change, and foster an environment conducive to innovation and progress. It accords to teachers and administrators their proper status as important professionals within the community.

The most important thing schools and communities can do is take the first step. We already have everything we need to start. Without breaking the budget, the Great Conversation can position every school district to secure the public sentiment it needs to unfold the full potential of every child. EL

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