

GIVING THE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL FACILITIES PLANNING

The likelihood of planning a community facility that pleases everyone is zero, and that seems twice as true for schools.

School facilities affect everyone in an area, and everyone has an opinion:

- Constituents usually pay for school facilities through taxes
- Parents demand their children receive the best education possible
- Community members want input when school facilities are shared (i.e. meeting spaces)
- People feel a sense of pride and tradition for specific buildings
- Families are attracted to live in school districts with strong reputations

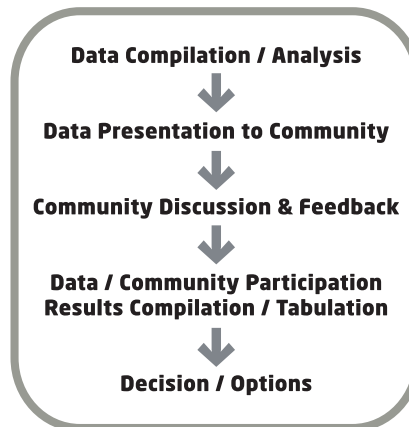
For these reasons and more, engaging the community in the school facilities planning process is much more effective than an internal decision. With participation, the community builds a vested interest not only in the final decision, but also in the process.

Who is the community? It includes ALL stakeholders in the school facility project, including:

- Parents
- Students
- Teachers and district staff
- Representatives from local municipalities
- Everyday citizens (including empty-nesters, senior citizens, local business owners, etc.)

An effective community engagement process follows several steps:

1. Compilation and analysis of relevant district data
2. Presentation of district data to community
3. Community discussion of district data
4. Compilation and tabulation of community participation results
5. Decision based on analysis of district data and community participation results



Compilation and analysis of relevant district data

The school district should compile and analyze all data appropriate to the project, including historical enrollment, projections, facility data, and economic information. One of the quickest and most efficient ways of accomplishing this task is to use Geographic Information Systems (GIS). GIS overlays and maps this information into an easy-to-understand computerized model. It's important for people to see all the data in one place. This makes it easier to talk about the real issues, not rumors, while eliminating pre-conceived notions and hidden agendas.

Presentation of district data to community

District data should be presented to the community in a clear and concise manner and framed within the parameters of the goals of the facility planning process. Bill Wise, superintendent of South-Western City Schools in Grove City, Ohio, helped orchestrate the facility planning process in his district in 2008. He said that while any good communication process is based on trust and honesty, it's important for a district to lay non negotiable items on the table at the first community meeting.

"If you explain what can't be negotiated at the start of the process, the community has a clear understanding of the situation," he explained. "For example, in our case, one nonnegotiable was land acquisition, while another was inflation. Our build-out is seven years long; therefore, we had to build in inflationary dollars so we wouldn't have to go back to voters for more money. It was vitally important for the community to understand this at the beginning of the process."

Community discussion of district data

As the community becomes educated about the planning process, they must

reconcile the district data with their own. Discrepancies between the facts and hearsay must be resolved through open and honest discussions.

Compilation and tabulation of community participation results

The results will describe areas of consensus and areas of difference and should be used to identify areas that need more research and discussion.

Cissy Bowman, communications director for the Mt. Lebanon School District in Pennsylvania, said several community members told her they were pleased to see their input incorporated into the facility plan. "The community was such a big and important part of our process that we didn't hear anything negative once facility planning results were posted on our web site," she explained. "People realized their time and input was truly valuable."

Decision based on analysis of district data and community participation results

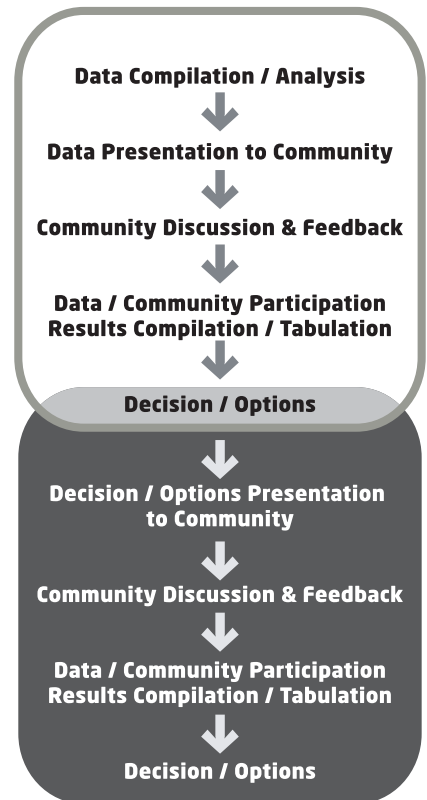
The school district should base school facilities plan decisions on the district data and community participation results. When a longer planning process is involved, the community engagement process repeats itself, this time presenting the previous

decision/options to the community. This repetition could occur limitlessly, and thus should be directly associated with the school facilities planning process to fit within the timeframe of the project.

A transparent and engaging community participation effort creates community ownership in the school facilities plan. The weight of promoting the plan is lifted from the district staff and administration and carried by the participants who are informed advocates for the plan and its process. Community participation gives the school board confidence that a decision based on these results is representative of what the community desires.

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