

This document is part of a series of resources that are designed for school and district personnel who, while not formal policymakers, still play a significant role in bringing the voices of students, parents, caregivers, family members, and community members to the process of making local district policy. By “local district policy,” we mean the procedures, positions, aspirations, and guidance that govern important aspects of the school district’s day-to-day and long-term work that are formally adopted by the local school board. Our hope is that these tools will clarify the local policy-making process and help people better understand, engage in, and influence the development of district policies.

This tool focuses on the foundational practices and strategies necessary to guide you in developing a community engagement policy.

Getting Started

When developing a community engagement policy, it’s important to be inclusive and work toward a vision of educational equity. The Great Schools Partnership defines educational equity as ensuring just outcomes for each student, raising marginalized voices, and challenging the imbalance of power and privilege. Inclusivity is part of this vision—ensuring broad participation particularly from people who have historically been kept from participating in policy-making processes. This requires intentional design, invitation, and co-creation of both events and processes. Broad participation will:

- Show the importance of shared decision-making
- Get people ready to enact the policy together after it’s passed
- Help raise the priorities of those who are usually kept from decision-making
- Improve the chances that the school board will pass the policy

An equitable community engagement policy is crafted by building a foundation of practices and mindsets (individually and within your community), then by establishing processes and strategies. For more information on these phases of the work, please read below.

Building the Foundation

The following actions will help set the foundation for a successful community engagement policy in your district. They are critical practices and actions to consider investing in before, during, and after adopting a community engagement policy.

1. **Strengthen your equity lens.** An equity lens helps us to understand the things that people and organizations say and do—and the outcomes that result—as a reflection of the unequal distribution of power and resources based on race and ethnicity, as well as other aspects of identity that include age, gender, sexual orientation, income level, religion, language, and disability. To fully commit to educational equity, this perspective should be developed and committed to at both an individual and an organizational level. It takes a lot of ongoing personal reflection and learning to strengthen your equity lens. When that reflection and learning leads to collective and individual action, foundational and structural changes occur. These foundational and structural changes are necessary to improve systems, student outcomes, and community experiences. When creating a community engagement policy, using an equity lens will help direct the policy toward the systemic and historical issues that prevent equitable community engagement. Applying an equity lens to policy-making also helps prioritize equity in both how things get done and what results from the process.

To start with strengthening your equity lens as an individual, please see the [Foundations of Equitable Community Engagement](#) for additional resources and principles.

2. **Strengthen relationships and (re)build trust.** Especially if you are hoping to create a policy that sets out community engagement goals and commitments, you must work on relationships and trust. Make sure you can identify the groups and individuals in your schools and community who are generally shut out of policy-making and decision-making processes. Work to understand their stories and involve them directly in developing the policy. It might also be helpful to have community conversations about diversity, inclusion, structural oppression, and the experiences of students, families, and community members who have been historically marginalized. Individuals should also reflect on their own beliefs, privileges, and behaviors when it comes to race, gender, language, and other aspects of their own and others' identities. This is an ongoing process and a really important investment in both the policy itself and your broader equity and engagement goals.
3. **Take impactful steps to engage more equitably with your community.** Before putting community engagement commitments and requirements into a policy, schools and districts should try out different ways to engage more equitably with families, students, staff, and community members. To start, take stock of the activities and routines in schools and across the district, such as celebrations and annual events. What is working well? What isn't? For whom? And why? Specifically, seek out the perspectives of students, families, and staff members who have been historically marginalized. There are many ways to deepen and expand equity-driven engagement practices: everything from providing childcare, food, and transportation for school-based activities to sharing survey results and asking families how they prefer to be contacted. Seek feedback to inform your next steps and clarify what specific strategies are most effective in your schools and community.

Developing Equitable Processes and Strategies

As you begin to think about, advocate for, and craft an equitable community engagement policy, it is critical to identify the people, resources, expectations, and structures required for success.

1. **Develop a core planning team.** While it is important to involve a wide range of people and groups in shaping the policy, a smaller team will need enough time to invest in facilitating and shepherding the process and team forward. In identifying people for this team, work toward having a mix of established district leaders and newer perspectives, especially from people who have been historically marginalized. To support everyone's participation, hold meetings during times and in places that are convenient for participants. Consider paying team members, providing food and childcare, and covering travel expenses. Once a group is set up, they should agree on norms and routines. They might even tackle a small project together (such as taking stock of school celebrations and annual events, as discussed above) so that when the policy development process begins, they have experience and established relationships. From designing brainstorming and feedback processes to writing or refining policy language, there are many tasks that a planning team can tackle.
2. **Assemble a broad coalition of the willing.** It is very helpful to identify a critical mass of people who can both contribute to the policy itself and pressure decision-makers as needed. As you are getting organized, bring forward your concerns and ideas for the policy to people both in the school district and in the broader community. Look for partners who have shown that they care about equity and engagement, those who have policy-making experience (such as a school committee member) to help champion the effort, and those who will be responsible for putting the policy into practice (for example, a person in the central office). You might also think about collaborating with individuals who hold opposing points of view so that you can account for those in the process and the policy itself. Building a broad coalition will help people get more involved, streamline communication, and smooth the way for the policy to be passed and put into day-to-day use.
3. **Draft your own policy.** Before beginning to draft a district community engagement policy, it's important to develop the planning team's understanding of local policy and the policy-making process in your

community. The [Local District Policy Primer](#) and [Accessing and Understanding Local District Policy](#) are good places to start. The Great Schools Partnership [sample community engagement policy](#) and community engagement policies in other communities might also be helpful starting points in shaping your own policy. You might want to look at community engagement policies in communities in your state from districts that are similar to yours, or in districts who have deep and established community engagement practices and policies to which you aspire. Use those sample policies as starting points and then work as a core planning team, with champions in the community, and with the community as a whole to surface their priorities. Then draft and refine a policy that reflects the community identified priorities, practices, and values.

4. **Define success.** Take the time to describe what success in the policy-making process means to you. When taking up new policies, it is not unusual for a school board or policy committee to request revisions, to ask lots of questions, or to postpone their decision. It is possible that the school board will even decide not to adopt the policy. There are still positive things that can result from suggesting a policy to the board. For instance, the groundwork discussed throughout this guidance will help you to make progress on many other aspects of equitable community engagement for your schools, district, and community. Managing expectations and thinking about a long-term strategy for sustaining your work can also help people stay invested over time. Additional positives include demystifying the policy-making process and demonstrating the right of every community to hold its elected officials accountable.
5. **Be strategic in your engagement with your school board.** When it comes to policy-making, sometimes timing matters. The rhythm of the school year means, for example, that school board members are typically consumed in budget development from the fall through early spring. Collective bargaining negotiations and response to new state legislation can also consume the bandwidth and time available to school board members. Any proposed policy is more likely to succeed if you take thoughtful and strategic action in choosing the right time to bring it forward. Once you have identified a good window of time for the school board to formally consider the policy, schedule your planning process so that all stakeholders, including members of the community, can be as involved as possible.

Planning for Implementation

If and when your policy passes, congratulations! Take time to thank the folks who were part of the process and celebrate in a way that's meaningful. Now it's time to get back to work. To make sure that the policy gets put into practice, partner with district leaders and coalition members to get the word out and build understanding about the new policy, both within the district and in the broader community. A communications and training plan and some dedicated time and resources will help everyone change the way they do business and bring the policy's goals and commitments to life. Start planning for action as soon as possible after the policy is adopted.

Please see [Moving Toward Equity](#) for additional ideas and support around implementation.