

# Community Engagement As Catalyst For Change In School-University Partnerships

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## Background

In the spring of 2003, three members of an observation team from the Talawanda-Miami Partnership community spent four daylong sessions watching a school-university partnership setting in Southern Georgia attack the question: Can we build a stronger community?

This team of observers – made up of the Mayor of the City of Oxford, the Assistant Superintendent of Talawanda Schools who happened to be a graduate of Miami's doctoral program in school leadership, and the Co-Chair of the Talawanda-Miami Partnership – engaged the Georgia Southern University/Portal, Georgia Partnership team in order to learn how to proceed with its own project centered on the cultivation of leadership capacity in the community to support the education of youth and the preservation and advancement of democracy.

What the observers found was the enormous complexity surrounding the task of community engagement. How can a leadership team proceed without becoming bogged down when members stake positions on issues? How can significant events in the life of the setting be positioned so as not to completely stymie the group's ability to engage the community and to act as change agents on their own behalf? What the observation team learned was that they themselves had the personal and community capacity to proceed, but that the leadership development of a core group of citizens would be challenging.

## Context of the Wider Project

The support for the next phase of the project, a leadership development seminar, came from the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) and its research/community action arm, the Institute for Educational Inquiry (IEI), through a generous grant from the Kellogg Foundation. The idea of the grant and the leadership development project was to engage diverse community leaders, including students, in the activity of engaging the community at a deeper level in order, ultimately, to provide more learning opportunities for youth. The training for this approach to developing leadership through community engagement focused on teaching members to listen to constituents and to forge community relationships based on goodwill, trust, and understanding. Instead of taking advocacy positions of interest to the leaders, leaders were challenged to find out more about what constituents thought and believed about the critical issues at hand.

During the two-year period following the observation cycle in Georgia, the Talawanda-Miami team engaged in leadership development activities. A team of 15 diverse members representing many community groups and factions was appointed to work on the project. The team worked during daylong sessions throughout the year to collect data from citizens about their perceptions of the school and community (Crislip, 2002). They wrote scenarios about their setting

and imagined how the political and economic winds might influence the future of their work together and the well-being of the district, university, and community (Crislip, 2002). They decided at the beginning of their second year together as a team to create an action plan to implement a study circles project throughout the school district community. The question the team sought to answer through the study circles project was: "How can we foster the valuing of public education and achievement in the Talawanda community?"

This question grew out of intense discussions during the first meetings regarding the political fallout of a movement to split the district into two districts. Longstanding tensions in the community over perceived lack of excellence in the school district led to the creation of a school reorganization committee that pressed the State Board of Education in a public presentation to consider its plea to separate Oxford City from the surrounding townships into two new school districts. Of course, emotions ran high over this movement, and the committee felt as though it should take steps to engage the wider community in dialogue, especially on the heels of the state's decision not to act in support of a school district split. We made assumptions that citizens would be able to engage in dialogue. However, dialogue requires a skill set that involves listening and suspending judgment. Both are difficult to achieve in a highly charged environment. Even in the absence of a highly charged environment, engaging the public is a comprehensive and complex initiative. Freidman (as cited in Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, & Koff, 2005) suggests using a structure to guide the process.

### **Implementing the Study Circles Project**

The team had already decided to work with study circles as the structure, and they planned to put the project in place during the fall of 2005. Study circles are groups of citizens who meet together over a four-meeting session to deal with a topic or a question in a structured manner (Campbell, Malich, & McCoy, 2001). The goal at the end of the four-session cycle is to produce an action plan for a project that the circle would take up in response to the question at hand. The meetings are meant to help community members, who represent diverse constituencies all within the same group, to: (1) surface personal reactions and feelings regarding the question; (2) address real barriers, problems, and issues surrounding the question as they manifest in personal and corporate societal experiences; (3) brainstorm ideas for addressing the issues and the question; and (4) come up with a plan to take positive social action toward defensible community-building ends. Each group agreed upon shared ground rules for community participation. For example, everyone should have a chance to speak. The group should deal with difficult issues or positions right away and not let negative feelings fester. And members should listen as closely as they can, and with as much intensity as they participate with as speakers.

Each committee worked hard to make its own ground rules for the sessions and to focus the sessions as idea-producing, action-oriented discussions around a particular question, one clear to all participants. We did not want to shutdown people's personal positions, but we wanted participants to take the position of valuing others' ideas and positions just as highly as their own.

At the end of the four sessions, each of the eight groups of approximately 10 members (with

two facilitators) presented a viable plan for future action in response to the question. The action-plan ideas ranged from having community events meant to engender more discussion by citizens to creating new means for delivering news about the district and its accomplishments to a wider constituency in the community. The teams continue to work on their plans to engage a wider group of citizens. The idea is to extend these activities so that everyone can express their views and develop a stake in the direction and decision-making of the school district and its community, including the university, all with the expressed foundational commitment of bettering children's lives.

### **Placing the Talawanda-Miami Study Circles Project in the Context of Public Engagement**

Public engagement is often confused with public relations or marketing, especially at election time. However, true public engagement requires that we develop strategies that involve all sectors of a community to plan effective approaches to issues that affect the entire community. This building of common ground cannot be a short-term or a one-shot approach, but most school districts and civic agencies lack the knowledge and the communication skills needed to sustain the process over time (Mathews, 1996).

The Talawanda-Miami Study Circles Project grew out of a multiyear planning effort by a small but representative group of citizens in the community. They visited other settings engaged in the work, met regularly with a structured agenda, developed skills in brainstorming, listening, conflict resolution, and facilitating, and talked with other groups around the country (10 DN sites exist around the United States) who were also planning or implementing similar community engagement projects.

According to Pendleton and Benjamin (as cited in Cambron-McCabe

et al., 2005), because public engagement requires and facilitates a shift in culture from authoritative rule to greater self-governance, it depends on developing leadership capacity and dispersing the functions of leadership from a central core of experts to the community at large.

One positive outcome of the movement to split the district in 2003 was the identification of new voices and multiple perspectives. Harnessing this new energy depended on developing leadership capacity among the constituents who were seeking common ground. The central planning committee asked some of these new voices to take on a leadership role by facilitating or recording one of the study circles. The facilitators and recorders participated in training for their roles in the study circles and served the larger project by identifying potential participants in their own or other study circles.

While the school administrators participated in the project, they made every effort to downplay any perceptions that they were the "experts." Their participation was that of community member and their remarks held no more weight than those of the others in the study circle.

Shifts of culture are not easy to make in a community of multiple perspectives. Yankelovich (1991, 1999) makes a strong case for the use of dialogue rather than discussion or debate of the issues.

As stated above, the planning team took the emotional climate in the school district into account in their planning. Instead of ignoring it and moving on, they acknowledged the climate and trained the facilitators to use dialogue as a strategy to acknowledge conflict and use it productively. The first two sessions were structured to get deeply rooted feelings into the open to be dealt with as the groups wrestled with the questions:

How does the question touch me personally?

What is the nature of the problem behind the question?

Follow-up is a crucial part of the process. You can't just go home and celebrate a positive conversation. The public will be easily disenchanted if they do not see evidence that their work meant something. "Plan strategic follow-up so that people see that their ideas meant something" (Friedman as cited in Cambron-McCabe et al., 2005, p. 282).

The action plans are being widely distributed in the community. One of the action plans calls for a reinstatement of a time-honored tradition, a Thanksgiving dinner served in the schools and open to the entire community. Somewhere along the journey of division in the Talawanda School District, this tradition was eliminated. However, the students who participated in the study circles remembered it fondly and put it forth to the entire group for implementation. Their enthusiasm permeated the summary session and immediately that evening members of the other groups agreed to assist them in their planning and implementation. A new feature of the dinner will be the publication of all of the action plans and the recruiting of volunteers to expand the work of the other study circles. Also, students across the district will be awarded savings bonds for their essays on, "I'm thankful for Talawanda because...."

One desired outcome of a well-organized and inclusive public engagement effort is the assumption of the responsibility and accountability of citizens for the quality of communal life. This first study circles project gave us a glimpse of that possibility in a community that has a long history of mistrust, disillusion, and apathy. Wheatley (2002) suggests that a community discovering what it cares about has the greatest power of change.

## References

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