

High Stakes Strategy

As part of your long-range planning, school board members and administrators need to consider what role outside groups and organizations should play in your district's future

The strategic governing team of Illinois' Community Consolidated School District 181 spent two days together in an intensive "strategic work session" last spring. Employing 10 different breakout groups over the course of the session, the team of school board members, superintendent, and senior administrators brainstormed about the district's values and vision statements; assessed internal strengths and weaknesses; identified important national, state, and local conditions and trends; and identified potential changes needed to address what appeared to be critical issues facing the district.

The board's planning and development committee, which designed and hosted the work session, added spice to the already rich strategic planning stew

by inviting a number of external organizations to participate. Those who accepted the invitation, including the executive director of the Hinsdale Center for the Arts, the vice president of the Clarendon Hills Park Board, the president of the Village of Hinsdale, and the superintendent of neighboring High School District 86, helped make the session a more powerful strategic planning event.

"Not only did the stakeholder representatives add valuable experience, expertise, and knowledge to our deliberations, they also got to know our district much better, so friend-building was an important outcome," a CCSD 181 board member said afterward.

A high-priority board concern

The CCSD 181 strategic work session is a good example of creative stakeholder relations management, which should be a high-priority concern of every school board, and especially of your board's external or community relations committee. I define stakeholders very simply as any group, organization, or institution that it makes sense for your district's strategic governing team to maintain a more or less close relationship with.

Every district has purely internal stakeholders—the school board, employees, and parent-teacher organizations—who are directly involved in leading and

managing the organization. Your district's direct "customers" and beneficiaries—the students and their families—can be thought of as an external/internal hybrid. And then there are purely external community stakeholders, such as city and county government, civic clubs, and chambers of commerce.

Typically, in my experience, strategic governing teams pay pretty close attention to the internal and hybrid stakeholders, but external stakeholder relations often are neglected. This has a potentially steep cost in terms of inadequate community understanding and support for the district.

External stakeholders can be divided into three broad categories:

- Top-tier stakeholders always require close attention because consistently high stakes are involved. These may include: your state government department responsible for K-12 education; the independent nonprofit education foundation that raises money for special district needs; the chamber of commerce, whose education committee has been actively involved for years in supporting your district's capital levies; city and county government, whose support for district tax issues is critical; and the print and broadcast media.

- Second-tier stakeholders need to be monitored to determine whether the stakes surrounding their issues have increased enough to merit closer attention, but generally they do not require explicit management. These are often "sleeping dogs" such as community organizations that might suddenly become energized over a particular educational issue, such as a property tax increase.

- Ad hoc strategic stakeholders are critical to accomplishing particular



strategic targets, such as the worker retraining program that your district is testing in partnership with the local community college. These groups may fade in importance after the strategic target has been accomplished.

The board's involvement

Why should your school board, or perhaps your external or community relations committee, be involved in building and maintaining stakeholder relations? I have four compelling reasons.

First, the stakes involved in particular relationships can be incredibly high. Second, most, if not all, of your board members are knowledgeable about these groups and often are closely connected to them. Third, successfully building and maintaining relationships with top-tier stakeholders often demands the involvement of your district's highest-ranking leaders, including those at the board level.

Finally, when your strategic governing team makes a list of stakeholders that your district needs to pay close attention to, you are likely to be amazed at the number and variety. Even if the superintendent and top administrators devoted all of their time to stakeholder

management, seven days a week, from early morning until late evening, they still could not cover the whole list effectively.

Your district's stakeholder relations program should consist of the following key elements:

- Identifying the key stakeholders and calculating the stakes involved.

- Determining the strategic governing team members who should have primary accountability for developing and carrying out the relationship with each of the top-tier stakeholders.

- Developing a detailed strategy for building and maintaining each top-tier relationship.

- Overseeing and managing the program's implementation.

A key responsibility for your board's external relations committee is to make sure that each of these elements is fully developed and carried out. Committee members should play a hands-on role in identifying and rank-ordering stakeholders, reviewing your strategies for managing relationships, and overseeing their implementation.

On occasion, committee members must play a hands-on role in developing and managing relationships with partic-

ular key leaders. Board members often are executives, board members, or dues-paying members of the very stakeholder organizations with which your district wants to build a relationship. Who is better to be engaged in the strategy?

Frequently, one of your school board members is closely connected with the CEO or particular board members of a key stakeholder organization, and hence can help to initiate or cement a working partnership.

Bottom line: Stakeholder relationships are far too important to your district's welfare to take a catch-as-catch-can approach, or just to rely on squeaky wheels to tell you when you need to pay attention to a particular relationship. The health of these relationships depends on meticulous planning and execution, and detailed board involvement is a must. ■

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