

A Policymaker and Advocate's Guide to Community Input

As a LEE member, your commitment to ending the injustice of educational inequity is strengthened by your dedication to the communities in which you are working. This toolkit will provide you with resources for gathering community input as you become a transformative force for and with students, communities, and the broader movement for educational equity. Additionally, this toolkit provides two case studies that offer examples of successful efforts to gather community input. Above all, gathering community input prioritizes the voices of community members in the advocacy and policymaking processes, and this understanding should drive your work.

Background

Community input is rooted in the idea that people should have voice in the policies that address the issues they face. In many communities, especially communities with predominantly marginalized populations, policy happens “to” people instead of “for” or “with” them. Power, and the perception of power, must stay with the stakeholders you are aiming to serve throughout the advocacy and policymaking process.

In order to enact/develop effective policy that serves the needs of affected stakeholders, it is important for you to gather feedback about your policy plan from the community.

Considerations for Gathering Community Input

As you begin your work, it is important to ground yourself in the knowledge, skills, and mindsets for effectively and respectfully gathering community input.

- **Check Mindsets:** Community input for policy and advocacy recognizes that all people are entitled to say in the decisions that affect their lives. It is important that you approach this work in a way that ensures you are not inadvertently reinforcing damaging power structures.
- **Build Relationships:** By building relationships, you not only earn the trust of the community you're working with, which gives you access to deeper and more valuable information, you also lay the groundwork for long-term success.
- **Earn Credibility:** Your credibility within the community is critical for both gathering input *and* effecting change through policy and advocacy. In the initial stages of earning credibility, it is important for you to actively demonstrate your commitment to the belief that genuine community input is a central component of effective policymaking.
- **Create a Plan:** As a teacher, advocate, and policymaker, you understand the value of planning and intentionality. As you begin to develop your approach, ask yourself what stage of the work you are in and what type of community input is best for the community you are working with and the project you are working on together.

Types and Phases of Community Input

As you work to meaningfully integrate community input into your work, you may find the following chronological framework helpful. Keep in mind that community input does not need to be restricted to the spaces or means provided below. Developing a mutually trusting relationship with the community in which you are working should always be a central driver of your work.

Learn About the Community Through Authentic Engagement

Research may not seem like a type of community input, but it can help you to earn credibility and gain a preliminary understanding of the history and culture of the community with which you are working. For example, you may uncover that previous efforts to address similar problems have been unsuccessful or divisive in their approaches. Be cautious about repeating mistakes and reinventing wheels, and remember to build on successes.

Administer Surveys

One useful tool may be conducting surveys. You can administer formal surveys during canvassing, over the phone, or by soliciting email or mail responses. You will want to train survey administrators as well as ensure that your methods are sound, both in terms of question-writing as well as in analysis of the responses. In some instances, pairing with academic institutions and formal researchers to conduct landscape reviews and community analyses may flesh out this approach.

Check Your Understanding

Before you move forward, it may be helpful you to step back and describe the community as you understand it, if only to yourself. This can help you unlock your own gaps in understanding and provide a frame for your upcoming conversations. For example, your initial perception of a community may be that stakeholders are disconnected from the political process. Expressing this as part of your understanding of the community may help you realize that it would be helpful for you to explore whether community members have previously engaged in political actions about issues that affect them.

Engage Cultural Brokers

Engaging early on with “[cultural brokers](#)” such as service providers, faith leaders, and other community representatives can help you both earn credibility and forge initial relationships. These trusted figures can provide ongoing community input, serving as powerful allies and continuing checks on projects. They can be both liaisons and representatives throughout the policymaking or advocacy process.

Outline the Problem and Solution

Gathering community input for policymaking and advocacy differs from traditional community organizing in its central purpose. As a policymaker and advocate, you have identified an issue and a proposed approach that is rooted in your professional expertise. It is important for you to enter the conversation with an outline of the problem and solution and to be able to effectively communicate and present it. Similarly, you should ensure that you are effective and transparent in describing your goals in gathering community input. As you include community members, you should be continuously improving your approach and engaging stakeholders in the fundamental processes that effect change.

Conduct Interviews

Cultural brokers can help you identify high-impact community members to speak to individually. These stakeholders can provide invaluable information in the form of personal experiences. Developing a compelling narrative with the voices of real, affected community members is one of the most effective methods of persuading policymakers, especially elected officials, to make critical changes. For this reason, and the implicit value in relationship-building, you should plan to conduct and engage in one-on-one interviews throughout the policymaking and advocacy process.

Host Focus Groups

A focus group is a selective gathering of community members brought together to discuss specific, targeted topics, guided by a skilled leader. Focus group participants are carefully selected to ensure the creation of a representative, safe, and productive environment. Focus groups are very valuable for follow-up, deeper dive discussions. For that reason, they are an excellent forum for fine-tuning your plan and gathering more community stories.

Organize Town Hall Meetings

Town Hall meetings are well-publicized, open meetings during which you help facilitate a discussion. They are valuable opportunities to listen to the stories and experiences of community members. You can also consider these “listening sessions.” Additionally, these are useful way to begin to bring together stakeholders and decision-makers to develop clear goals and action plans. These can be excellent starting points to help transition from the gathering and planning phase into the mobilization phase of policymaking and advocacy.

Case Studies

Anna Moffit - Policymaker

Anna Moffit, a LEE member and lifelong Madison, Wisconsin resident, was elected to her local school board in 2015. As she began her new post, the community was reconsidering the role of [school resource officers](#), which presented both challenges and opportunities as Anna sought to engage stakeholder communities, understand the issue, and build effective policy.

Strategies

Anna entered the situation knowing of its complex history and challenging dynamics. With an eye toward keeping everyone in the conversation, she built and managed relationships with as many affected community members as possible.

- **Conducting Research:** Anna used all the resources at her disposal to learn about people she needed to engage with. One method was through social media. By making herself available on Facebook and honing a strong presence on the platform, she encouraged people to engage with her. When they did, Anna learned more about them from their public profiles. She often found common interests, causes, or even friends that helped make difficult conversations easier. This had the additional benefit of providing Anna with information regarding what community members said about specific issues, which helped her effectively prepare for meetings and holistically approach the conversations.
- **Earning Credibility:** Knowing about people and groups with whom she hoped to engage helped Anna prepare herself to earn credibility and, eventually, trust with people who were originally cautious. In addition to finding common interests, Anna made sure to open conversations by listening to what stakeholders wanted, and to ask them how she could help.
- **Engaging Cultural Brokers:** Social media also helped Anna earn credibility by helping her find common relationships. She leveraged her personal and professional network to have people “vouch” for her and get her conversations with some of the people and organizations who were traditionally wary of the school board on this issue, such as leaders in the law enforcement community. By beginning to rebuild those relationships, Anna opened up conversations that were critical to success and had been previously closed. Anna also actively sought out engagement with groups that work with those most affected by school district-police department relations. Specifically, she asked for input from organizations representing students of color, students with mental health issues, and LGBTQ students.

Outcomes

As she built these relationships, Anna also built her own credibility and cultivated a trusting, transparent relationship with stakeholders. Here, Anna also leveraged her strong social media presence. By building a platform through Facebook specifically, she was able to regularly interact with stakeholders. She posted information and agendas for school board meetings discussing the issue and frequently attended meetings hosted by other organizations. As she actively listened to more individuals, her thinking on the issue evolved in a way that will influence the conversations and policies about school resource officers in Madison going forward.

Reilly Pharo Carter - Advocate

Reilly Pharo Carter is the Executive Director of Climb Higher, an education coalition in Colorado aimed at helping stakeholders understand the policies and realities of assessments and standards. Statewide legislation related to standards and assessments are currently being written in Colorado, and her group seeks to help policymakers understand the effects of the legislation on stakeholders.

Strategies

Reilly's work is grounded in building authentic community relationships that are based on clear expectations.

- **Create a Plan:** The basis of Reilly's leadership is in building an organization around authentic relationships. For example, Reilly recognizes the limitations that smaller nonprofits face, many of which are performing direct service work. Reilly's organization gives out sub-grants to organizations, recognizing that asking them to use their limited bandwidth to help support an additional cause may not be feasible for an organization that has a critical voice.
- **Host Focus Groups:** Reilly brought together groups of people for "Community Conversations." These were small, discussion-based meetings. To make these meetings accessible, Reilly worked to schedule them at times and places that were convenient for the stakeholders. She also provided translators and food to help make participation more feasible.
- **Build Relationships:** In addition to bringing together organizations, Reilly also brought unconventional stakeholders to the conversation. This included asking current and recent high schoolers to participate, while elevating the voices of teachers and principals in the policy discussion. She also facilitated relationship-building between stakeholders by organizing school site visits for policymakers to see what happened in classrooms firsthand.
- **Outline the Problem and Solution:** The process of identifying both problems and solutions *with* community members is foundational to Reilly's approach. She recognizes that the work is deeply intertwined with issues of race and equity, and that communities have often been misled about the value and meaning of their voices in policy conversations. She prioritizes making expectations clear up front, especially in defining what it is she is hoping to gain from engaging with the community.

Outcomes

Although Climb Higher is in its early stages, it put together a policy brief in early 2017 with the help of myriad stakeholder groups. They will distribute the brief as new legislation is being written to address standards and assessments across Colorado.