

## The Community Engagement Conference <sup>1</sup>

### *Overview*

The Community Engagement Conference is for a school district's key external stakeholders. It is a specially designed large-group format that allows participants to self-organize into a series of small group discussions about the future of the school system. This conference is conducted early in *Phase 2—Envision* in the School System Transformation (SST) Protocol. Data from this conference are used to develop a “fuzzy” vision for the future of the school district that is developed in the System Engagement Conference that happens next.

### *Background*

The external environment for contemporary school districts is increasingly complex and unstable. This kind of external environment requires an organization design characterized as organic. An organic design suggests new ways for educators and stakeholders to cooperate and collaborate to transform their school districts. “Navigating this complex situation requires new strategies and technologies to explore opportunities, design and redesign work practices, adapt to the new challenges and recognize the potential in new possibilities...and to do all of these effectively and quickly, involving players from all levels of the organisation or the community” (Nauheimer, date unknown, page unknown).

All organizations, including school systems, exist for one superordinate purpose; that is, to educate students of parents living in their community. The children and their parents are customers of a school system. There are other key players in a school district's external environment that are interested in school district outcomes. These others include: suppliers, critics, competitors, and other stakeholders like state education agencies, the business community, and local colleges and universities. Consulting with key players from these stakeholder groups is a very important way to identify the expectations, needs, dreams and concerns that these people have for a school district. Identifying what these people think of a school district and how they feel about what's happening in the district is a critical early activity for transforming school systems.

In the SST Protocol carefully selected key players are invited to participate in a multi-stakeholder process called the Community Engagement Conference. This conference is designed using the principles of Harrison Owen's (1997) Open Space Technology. The Community Engagement Conference is based on the idea that to be effective in the long run a school district must assure that...

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<sup>1</sup> Based on principles of Open Space Technology.

- its services respond appropriately to the expectations of external key players,
- the investment its community makes in their district in the form of tax dollars is seen as a “good investment,”
- the internal social “infrastructurre” of the district is designed to support effective work that is both motivating and satisfying,
- the relationship with external suppliers is as simple and effective as possible, and
- the overall performance of the district literally delights the external key players.

Historically, educators interested in engaging large numbers of community members in their improvement efforts were limited by group size and by the negative effects of large group dynamics. For example, the upper limit for workshop participants is around twenty persons. But the number of key players in the external environment of a school district far exceeds 20 people.

Recently, several new tools for large group facilitation have been developed, among them **Search Conferences** (Emery & Purser, 1996), **Future Search** (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000) and **Open Space Technology** (Owen, 1997). While the Search Conference and Future Search principles underpin the System Design Conference, Cluster Design Conferences, and Design Workshops that are part of SST Protocol principles of Open Space guide the design of the Community Engagement Conference.

Within the context of the SST Protocol, the Community Engagement Conference is organized and conducted early in *Phase 2—Envision*. The purpose of this conference is to invite a carefully selected group of external key players into one room to discuss their views of a desirable future for a school district. The Community Engagement Conference can comfortably accommodate up to 1,000 people. There are examples of Open Space Technology engaging more than 2,000 people. Some proponents of this approach suggest that the process can engage an unlimited number of participants.

The Community Engagement Conference provides a framework of time and space in which invited key players self organize into smaller discussion or work groups that are all focused on a main theme for the conference. Participants join small discussion or work groups on issues or topics they feel passionate about and for which they will take responsibility.

### *How to Design a Community Engagement Conference*<sup>2</sup>

A Community Engagement Conference is organized around a guiding question—a central theme—that will be examined through multiple small discussion or work groups over a one to three day period. The guiding question or theme must be carefully selected and constructed by the Leadership Team for a district’s transformation journey and

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<sup>2</sup> If you are interested in getting a more detailed description of the design process, please refer to Harrison Owen’s book on Open Space Technology that is listed in the references.

supported by a skilled facilitator (ideally the Assistant Superintendent for Transformation who has received training on how to use principles of Open Space Technology).

The guiding question or theme should address a “burning” issue or opportunity that will ensure a high diversity of opinions. With a one day conference design, the process will stimulate a good exchange of ideas. With a two day design, the process will generate a good exchange of ideas and a set of recommendations. And, for a three day conference, a school system will experience a good exchange of ideas, a set of recommendations and a list of prioritized next steps.

The Community Engagement Conference does not have a fixed agenda and does not use invited speakers. All participants are also treated as equals, thus the Leadership Team and Assistant Superintendent for Transformation must set up the central gathering room to create equality among participants; e.g., no special seats for the mayor or the business leaders. The central gathering room is designed by organizing chairs in an ever expanding set of concentric circles while leaving open space in the center of the circle.

At the beginning of the conference, the facilitator comes to the center of the circle to introduce the purpose of the conference. He or she then restates the guiding theme and invites volunteers to come to the center to announce their interest in leading a small discussion group focusing on a sub-theme or topic for which the volunteer has a passion. This continues until everyone who wants to lead a discussion group has announced his or her topic.

The facilitator then invites the volunteers to go to the large “schedule” that is posted on an available wall (a schedule will probably be at least 10 to 15 feet wide and 6 to 8 feet high—you can use flip chart paper that is taped together to create the schedule). The schedule has available rooms listed across the top of the paper and the time slots down the left side of the schedule. This creates a huge matrix. Volunteers go to the schedule and pick a room and a time slot and then enter their topic and their name in that box.

When the discussion leaders are finished posting their topics, the facilitator then invites the remaining participants to go to the “marketplace” (that is, to go up to the schedule) and “register” for several discussions. No one is obliged to register for a discussion group, so if some people decide not to participate, that is okay. After the registration period is completed, the participants launch the discussion periods and they self-manage their participation in the various discussion groups.

Within the first two hours of the Community Engagement Conference, the participants will have self-organized by setting an agenda related to the main theme of the conference. The self-organization results in multiple discussion groups being formed. On average, 30 focus groups are set up in a conference of one hundred participants.

At the end of each discussion period, a summary of the main discussion points from each group are submitted to a central location where they are entered into a computer database. At the end of the conference, each participant takes home a copy of the conference proceedings.

### *Four Principles and One Law*

*1st Principle: Whoever comes are the right people.* The Community Engagement Conference is for those participants who are interested and ready to commit themselves to helping a school district transformation. Only those who are present in a particular discussion group can contribute to that group (in other words, people who do not participate in a discussion cannot “submit” their ideas after the fact).

*2nd principle: Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.* This principle defines an attitude that discussion leaders and participants need to embrace. Sometimes people go to a discussion group and leave disappointed because it didn’t turn out the way they expected. This principle says that however a discussion turns out, that’s the only way it could have turned out given the people who showed up and given the passion they brought to the discussion. This attitude also informs participants about their responsibility to speak up when they are in a group. If they don’t share their views and things don’t turn out the way they thought they would, they have no one to blame but themselves.

*3rd principle: Whenever it starts is the right time.* Sometimes people show up late for a discussion group and it is slow in getting started. This principle says, don’t worry about that.

*4th principle: When it's over, it's over (When it's not over, it's not over.).* People in the small groups must know that a discussion process cannot be forced to go beyond its allotted time or forced to stop at that time. Whenever the participants want to stop a discussion or if they want to keep going beyond the scheduled time, that’s okay according to this principle.

### **The Law of the Two Feet**

There is only one law guiding the Community Engagement Conference and its small discussion groups: Whenever a participant feels that he or she is neither contributing nor learning, he or she is encouraged to stand up, walk out, and go to another discussion group. If participants who use the Law of Two Feet join other groups, this creates cross-fertilization of ideas from one group to another as they share what they learned from the other group discussion.

### *References*

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- Weisbord, M. & Janoff, S. (2000). *Future Search* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.