



STRENGTHENING AND SUSTAINING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN VERMONT

Introduction

On all kinds of issues, people want more choices, more information and more of a say. This is true in many places across our country, and it certainly seems to be true in Vermont. Residents have a lot to contribute, not only with their input and ideas but with their volunteer time and willingness to work together to solve problems. In a variety of ways, people want to be engaged.

This handout is a summary of the Planning Guide that is intended to help Vermonters decide what kinds of engagement we want. The handout and Guide are designed to help Vermonters plan for an overall system for engagement that features those opportunities and is supported by local governments, school systems, businesses, faith communities, other organizations and by citizens themselves.

Why Does Good Engagement Matter?

Because unproductive engagement is damaging.

Conventional public meetings are frustrating to citizens, officials and staff, and they seem to decrease trust in government.

Because productive engagement results in better policies. When people come together in well-structured processes, where they can talk in small groups about what they have learned and what they want to recommend, the resulting policies and plans are smarter, more broadly supported and better reflect what citizens want.

Because productive engagement strengthens citizenship. People become more knowledgeable about issues, they sometimes change their opinions and they become more likely to vote and volunteer.

Because productive engagement strengthens our communities. When the whole system of community engagement is working well, there are a number of benefits:

- **Improved collaboration.** When there are stronger connections between people and groups in the community, they are more likely to work together to solve problems.
- **Stronger social networks.** Communities with stronger networks and higher social capital have higher rates of economic growth, lower levels of unemployment and lower crime rates. Residents are physically healthier and the communities are more resilient and better able to deal with natural disasters and other crises.
- **Improved student achievement and well-being.** When parents, students and other family members are fully engaged in student learning, this results in higher test scores, lower dropout rates, safer schools and many other positive impacts on student achievement and well-being.

Common Settings for Engagement



Types of Engagement: Conventional, Thick and Thin



Conventional engagement is what happens in most public meetings today. Citizens and officials are separated from one another, there are no breakouts or small-group discussions and citizens have brief opportunities (typically limited to two or three minutes) to address the whole group.



Thick engagement is more intensive, informed and deliberative. Most of the action happens in small-group discussion. Organizers assemble large and diverse numbers of people; give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels.



Thin engagement is faster, easier and more convenient. It includes a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. It is less likely to build personal or community connections. One way of summarizing the difference is to say that thick engagement empowers small groups and thin engagement empowers individuals.

Thick participation opportunities are more likely to be face-to-face and thin ones are more likely to happen online. However, many thick processes include both online and face-to-face elements, and some examples of thin participation (signing a petition, for example) certainly existed long before the internet.

Thick, thin and conventional engagement have different strengths and limitations, and they complement each other well. All of them could be part of an effective “multichannel” system for engagement.

Engagement Works Best When It Is:

Interactive	Everyone has a chance to contribute.
Timely	It happens at a point when people can have an influence on important decisions.
Inclusive	It brings together a wide range of people, including people who may have been excluded or not engaged before.
Authentic	People value one another's input and know the process will have meaningful results.
Transparent	It is open, honest and understandable.
Informed	Everyone has access to the knowledge and data they need, and there is balanced information describing the pros and cons of different options.
Accessible	The barriers to participation (including location, time, language and other factors that might deter people) are as low as possible.
Responsive	What people say is documented, and decision-makers report back to participants on the outcomes of engagement.
Network-building	Engagement helps to build relationships and networks over the long term.
Evaluated	People are able to track and measure how engagement is working.

Building Blocks for Stronger Systems of Engagement

What kinds of engagement activities do Vermonters want? Where should those activities take place? Summarized in the chart below are six overarching categories of engagement, grouped with some activities or tools that can help make them successful. All six of these building blocks are important! You should consider ways to support each of them:

Enabling Family Decision Making

- Student-led parent-teacher conferences
- Student-centered learning teams
- Online tools
- Opportunities to interact with government and school officials around questions and concerns

Enabling Community Decision Making

- More participatory public meetings (school boards, planning commissions, budgeting)
- Participatory Budgeting
- More participatory homeowners associations, PTAs and other grassroots groups
- Youth councils
- Advisory committees that engage residents

Encouraging Public Work

- Large-scale volunteering activities
- Coordination among organizations and groups that recruit and support volunteers
- Crowdfunding and mini-grant programs
- Apps and platforms for teams and tasks

Gathering Input and Data

- Crowdsourcing exercises
- Apps for identifying problems with physical infrastructure
- Surveys, polls, interviews and focus groups

Discussing and Connecting

- Regular social events
- Local online forums, including social media
- Welcoming public spaces

Disseminating Information

- School and local government websites
- Dashboards and apps for school and government data
- Serious games
- Partnering with media organizations
- Interactive maps

Tools and Structures to Consider

Once you have a sense of what kinds of engagement you want, the next step is to consider some of the tools, strategies and structures you can use to make that vision a reality. Here are some possibilities:

1. Guidelines for more productive public meetings.

Official public meetings of school boards, select boards and other public bodies can work more smoothly when they use strategies to make those meetings more participatory, transparent and effective.

2. An engagement committee or commission. A local engagement commission or advisory board can help advise public institutions on the design, implementation and evaluation of public engagement.

3. Resources for revitalizing grassroots groups and informing community conversations. Grassroots groups can be revitalized in several ways:

- Training programs that provide recruitment, facilitation and organizational skills
- How-to materials that reinforce those skills
- Policies that delineate the role(s) of these groups in policymaking—on what kinds of issues and decisions will the association be asked to advise the school board, town council and other elected and appointed officials? What will the process be for those interactions? How will their opinions be incorporated into final decisions?
- New meeting formats that are more social, child-friendly and fun

4. A public engagement protocol to help public officials and employees decide what kinds of decisions and situations warrant citizen involvement, what level or kind of engagement would be appropriate and what they might accomplish by engaging.

5. Guidelines for working with online forums. School groups, homeowners associations and other groups are more likely to succeed if they work with or establish local online forums that connect residents who live in the same area, or parents whose children attend the same school.

6. Resources for school redesign and student-centered learning. UP for Learning has a host of tools and dialogue strategies to help participants understand the basics of both flexible pathways and proficiency-based learning. They also have a variety of activities to explore both

why schools are changing, and what a redesigned school looks and sounds like. These can be found on their website at www.upforlearning.org/initiatives/communicating-school-redesign.

7. A public participation ordinance or resolution that defines engagement, describes the principles that make it productive and meaningful, and gives public officials and staff the backing to try new forms of engagement that live up to those principles. A model ordinance can be found here at <http://bit.ly/mpplegal>.

8. Job descriptions for professionals supporting engagement who work for local governments or school systems. Because engagement is usually so ill-defined, the people serving in those roles are often unaware of the kinds of ideas and processes described in this document. Job descriptions that describe the skills necessary to organize and support engagement, and that establish performance benchmarks to be used in professional development and promotion, can be beneficial. An example from Santa Rosa, California can be found here at <http://bit.ly/santarose>.

9. Civic asset maps can help communities assess their current civic infrastructure and envision better systems for engagement. One example is LocalWiki; the version of the technology used in Saranac Lake, New York, (<http://bit.ly/saranaclake>) might be the most appropriate model for Vermont communities. In addition to their capacity for illustrating civic infrastructure, the creation of these maps—since they invite contributions and edits from citizens—can in themselves be an effective form of public engagement.

10. Citizen advisory boards that engage, rather than simply represent. Citizen advisory bodies such as advisory boards, committees and commissions provide existing institutional opportunities for public engagement. With the aid of training, how-to resources and changes in their charters, CABs could adopt more explicitly democratic roles, helping to engage citizens through social media, public deliberation processes and other tools and techniques.