

## Participation That Counts: Integrating Community Input into Decision-making

By Patricia W. Elliott  
Presentation to the Regina Board of Education  
March 25, 2014

I am a school parent and Cathedral Area resident. I teach at the University of Regina, and am in the final stages of completing a doctorate at the Institute of Co-operative Studies, within the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan. My research area involves local governance and public engagement. In short, I am an engaged school parent with an active interest in public policy, including education policy.

I am also a founding member of RealRenewal. We have about 220 members mostly from school communities around Regina, with a few outside Regina and in other provinces. Over the past seven years, we have worked in partnership with groups such as the Faculty of Education, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Regina Public Interest Research Group. We are also institutional members of the Saskatchewan Community Schools Association.

RealRenewal's focus is transparency, accountability and public voice in education decision-making. We work on this through two streams: research and public engagement. Our research data is compiled in workshops, interviews and online, and then transmitted to decision-making bodies through reports and presentations. A typical example is our contribution to the Joint Task Force on First Nations and Metis Education and Employment. We developed an accessible online version of the task force's focus group meeting questions; this exercise attracted 80 participants, of whom 72 per cent self-identified as First Nations caregivers and students. Their verbatim remarks were handed off to an education researcher, who coded and

extracted themes that formed the basis of 18 recommendations to the Task Force (Sanders, 2012).

Our second stream of work, public engagement, is generally but not exclusively carried out in the arena of school closures. At the invitation of school communities – and only at their invitation – we help inform citizens of decision-making processes and their right to participate. We typically assist with research, fundraising, networking with other affected school communities, and leafleting and postering neighbourhoods. If a meeting hall is full, you know our volunteer network has been busy. This is appreciated by School Community Council members who feel they have been constrained from connecting with parents and being publicly active in defense of their schools.

I admit I have trepidation about our community engagement work, because I am aware we are pulling community members into a public engagement process that has flaws unlikely to work in their favour. In the case of school closures, I have watched school communities repeatedly come armed with their carefully honed presentations, their research, their videos, and their parent surveys – only to have their aspirations defeated, not most of the time, or three-quarters of the time, but 100 per cent of the time, leaving them to wonder why they bothered. The fact that this happens in other locations, not just Regina, indicates the problem is systemic (Elliott, 2012; Phipps, 1993). In 2011, RealRenewal conducted an exit survey of Athabasca School parents, following the decision to close their school. Among the comments we gathered:

I think that most members of the Board approached the public consultations as a necessary step before closing the school, rather than as an important consideration before reaching a decision.

Whatever priorities the community had weren't as important as the board's own priorities. It was pretty pointless, the whole exercise.

The whole process was a waste of time. (cited by RealRenewal, 2011)

This research was compiled into a report presented to the school board, along with recommendations to improve communications and decision-making processes. Some of the communications ideas were adopted, but the more fundamental decision-making recommendations, such as the establishment of joint committees, were not. This is unfortunate because once again we find ourselves in a very deep state of impasse with a school community over the future of their school.

With this presentation I would like to revisit some of those concepts more deeply. I do this in support of parents and community members who want to keep Connaught School functioning for at least a year, and to use this time to meaningfully participate in the determination of the school's future. I believe they have chosen a wise course of action, given examples of projects that have not advanced beyond the planning phase, for example the Athabasca-Argyle build.

If you decide to take a path of public engagement – and I can't imagine why you wouldn't – it is important to get it right. The International Association for Public Participation states among its core values that those affected have a right to participate in decision-making, and that this participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will actually influence the decision. Processes that succeed are:

- ▶ mutually developed
- ▶ provide sufficient information
- ▶ employ data brought forward by community members, and
- ▶ exercise inclusive decision-making.

The IAPP is quite active in Canada. I strongly encourage you to join and attend some of their workshops, mostly recently held in Calgary.

Abelson, et. al. (2003) state that questions to be considered in the design of public participation processes include:

- ▶ The degree of community input into agenda-setting, establishing rules, selecting experts and information.
- ▶ Who chooses the information.
- ▶ Who chooses the experts.
- ▶ Adequacy of time to consider, discuss and challenge the information.

...with the end goal of achieving broad consensus over the decision. It is worth noting that the questions raised by Abelson have all been major points of contention in the public deliberations over Connaught.

Spada and Vreeland (2013), writing in *The Journal of Public Deliberation*, point to moderator selection as a crucial starting point. Their research found that when a moderator intervenes – however subtly – in favour of a position, it impacts the preferences of participants. I don't think the Connaught community is easily impacted, but it is nonetheless something that parents pick up on almost immediately, sometimes causing them to disengage from the process. As a case in point, although the meeting on February 25 was presented as an opportunity for community brainstorming, options were limited and information was presented in a manner that leaned heavily toward closing the school in June and sending the students to Wascana, leaving the impression of a pre-determined outcome. In the words of one meeting participant:

They've basically made up their minds...we know how they're going to vote and that's where the lack of trust comes from. (Meeting transcript, 2013)

This echoes responses to the community consultations held in 2012, which opened with a presentation of Fielding Nair International-designed schools and a strongly presented argument that this was the way to go. If community had been involved in preparing and presenting information, there no doubt would have pictures of schools that looked like Connaught situated in neighbourhoods that looked like Cathedral, providing a palatable range of examples. As it was, some participants felt manipulated and disempowered, and questioned the selection of a facilitator who had a potentially high stake in the outcome. A representative sample comment among several along this line is:

I feel that we will have little input in any decisions. I feel that the decisions are already made and these meetings are a waste of time. (P3A, 2012)

Spada and Vreeland (2013) note that when a moderator has a stake, there are means to neutralize the impact, for example selection of multiple moderators, random selection, mutual development of the agenda and information and, at very least, full and honest disclosure of the option preferences of meeting leaders.

The next step, if you are going to pull community members into a meeting, is to have a clear method of how the information will be recorded, analyzed and applied to options and conclusions. It must be more than an opportunity for the school board to present and the public to vent. This means gaining the services of a transcriber, finding someone to analyze and code qualitative data, and then acting to support the results of your consultation to the best of your abilities. Otherwise, there is no point in asking people what they think.

When community input plays no place in option selection, a serious divide in the deliberations is created, as illustrated by this exchange at the Feb. 25 public meeting:

Participant. So you have an option to keep our school?

Director. I do, but I also have to balance the risk.

Participant. But if an engineer said if with 20 to \$25,000 it could be saved for a year? Then why not? Why not? And why isn't it given as an option, because I'm sure if it was an option on the survey, I can imagine 80 per cent of the people would say please spend 20 grand on our kids so they can go here another year.

Director. That information will be put in front of the board.

Participant. But it won't be because it hasn't been collected. You haven't given it as an option.

Director. Well, but there's room on the survey that we did say make your suggestions, give us your opinion and to make suggestions about other options. If you need to have that included, then please just (do that).

Participant. I mean theoretically the vote hasn't happened. Theoretically it's not a certainty, the vote hasn't happened yet. So why not include it? Maybe you can change it on Survey Monkey, I'm sure you have time to adjust it now. Add an option 6.

Participant2. Why is not an option for you? Why?

Several audience members: Why? Why isn't it on the survey?

Superintendent. Can we keep the questions to the microphone?

You must do more than 'honour' community-generated options – you must include them. We have undertaken a community-authored survey of parents, developed over the course of several meetings, and the circulation of several drafts. Options were gathered from meeting notes and call-outs to community. In emails to parents we were careful not to include any communication describing or advocating possible school futures, and then directing them to the link, as this pollutes and invalidates the data. As of today, preliminary data suggests parents heavily favour options excluded from the board survey, in particular strongly favouring maintaining the current school at minimum until 2015, and making creative use of existing Cathedral Area facilities to house all the school population together in the event of relocation. When community options

are included, community solutions emerge, often looking quite different, but no less valid, than options prepared by the board.

In the case of the 2012 consultations, your facilitator in fact did a thorough job of recording and coding meeting results. I would invite you all to revisit the community comments, which provided both a clear direction and prescient warnings, for example:

- ▶ “Please repair the front steps soon!!”
- ▶ “[I fear] not moving fast enough to save the building and keep it safe and open.”
- ▶ “School will be closed due to structural issues – renos or rebuild not done on time.” (P3A, 2012)

People knew the consequences of continued inaction beyond monitoring, and should have been heard. If their voices had been more than an appendage to a report, perhaps we would not be here today, faced with what school community members have told you is a premature and unwanted eviction that may ultimately jeopardize – rather than renew – the future of their school.

The problem at this stage lies in connecting community engagement data to decision-making in a meaningful way. To do this well, a number of pitfalls to avoid have been identified by community engagement planners. These include:

**Unverified counter-data.** A common statement is that ‘a lot of people’ think a school should close. Who are these people, what are their numbers, and what is the context? Are these comments at a public meeting, or chat around a dinner table? Are they from the affected school community, or from external social circles? Unless these questions can be answered, introducing the information to decision-making is problematic, to say the least.

**Data exclusion.** Overly rigid processes and silo-ing lead to whole swaths of community concerns, issues and ideas being pushed off the table. This is especially a concern where education is involved, because community health and stability are known determinants of student success, while student mobility and busing have been shown to negatively impact literacy and numeracy scores (Coalition for Community Schools; Henderson, 2009; Ingersoll, 1989)

**Claims of higher legitimacy.** Being elected doesn’t endow special wisdom, unfortunately. For this reason, your provincial and federal counterparts regularly

establish independent task forces, panels and committees of review. Further, the common statement that trustees must overrule local concerns because they represent the whole city is based on untenable logic. If this is so, why not do away with the subdivision system, as the Catholic school board has done? And why would you ever bother to hold a community consultation, if it is to be inevitably overruled by perceived citywide concerns? Local perspectives are keys to public engagement and consensus decision-making. This would include taking your lead from the one trustee among you who knows the community best and has children in the school.

**Ad homonym responses.** I've noticed that when teachers and superintendents make presentations, they are greeted with smiles, every word is lapped up attentively, and they are asked pertinent questions. This is seldom the case when community members come forward. Sadly, after giving information-rich presentations, members of the public end up spending their brief time being asked not about the content of their presentations, but rather to defend themselves, the organizations they belong to, and their qualifications. This leaves much relevant information unexplored.

**Paternalism.** We appreciate that trustees care about children and their safety. However, when you say this to the actual parents of the actual children, it takes on a tone you perhaps do not intend. You did not give birth to the children, you did not raise them, you do not know them, nor do you have any higher concern for their wellbeing – or knowledge of what is best for them – than their actual parents. While intentions may be good, it is important to remind yourselves of this from time to time, and to place greater trust in the wisdom of parents.

**Acknowledgement without action.** This is the last pitfall on the list, and perhaps the easiest to overcome, in that there are structured approaches and a variety of promising models available. Some of the most common are the establishment of citizen panels, representative committees and joint task teams. Task teams typically gather necessary information, review relevant research, invite public input, seek out broad consensus, develop recommendations and prepare reports (Brown, 2006). The goal is to combine technical expertise and institutional decision-making with public values and interests (Renn, et. al, 1993).

We understand that some members of the school board have a vision for Connaught School. It is just as clear the school community has a different vision. The survey report you have received indicates a school in the neighbourhood is highly important to parents and community members. However, a *new* school is not important to them. The same survey notes that the Connaught's history and heritage are highly valued, and that the community's perception of new school builds are largely negative. Parents said they want a more equal say in decision-

making, and a more thorough and balanced exploration of options. These are reasonable expectations. While a single survey presents a limited sample, its core findings have been verified and repeated through community consultations, meetings with the SCC, presentations to the board, and one-on-one meetings with parents and community members.

In closing, the board of education can bulldoze through with a quick closure, but the clear danger is the dissolution of a healthy school community, placing permanent – not temporary – pressure on surrounding schools. Just 11 per cent of parents said they were likely to follow relocation options offered by the board. This is a serious issue. It casts doubt on the ability to reconvene the school community at a later date, and suggests options closer to home must be cultivated, which will take some time, and that a less disruptive renovation alternative must be more thoroughly explored. The school community is calling on the Ministry, the Board and the community to sit down at the same table to develop a mutually acceptable, rational, well-researched plan for the future of the students and the school. By advocating this approach, school community members have proposed a clear forward path. Taking up this call is a win-win option for the board. It will lend meaningful, helpful public participation to resolve a difficult problem, and provide a working model for future situations. Rather than a few people attempting to impose a highly externalized vision on an entire community, it is better to truly work together. I urge you to therefore vote in favour of emergent funds to keep the school operating and to apply your limited planning funds toward allowing a much-needed, long overdue process of genuine, equality-based community engagement to unfold.

Thank you.

## References

- Abelson, J., P. Forest, J. Eyles, P. Smith, E. Martin & F. Gauvin. 2003. Deliberations about deliberative methods: issues in the design and evaluation of public participation processes. *Social Science & Medicine*. 57, 239-251
- Brown, M. 2006. Survey article: Citizen panels and the concept of representation. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. 14 (2), 203–225
- Coalition for Community Schools. n.d. Community schools: Promoting student success. A rationale and results framework. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools and Institute for Educational Leadership.
- Elliott, P.W. 2012. School consolidation and notions of progress. In *Education*. 18(1).
- Henderson, B. 2009. The school bus: A neglected children's environment. *Journal of Rural Community Psychology*. E12(1)
- Ingersoll, G.M. 1989. Geographic mobility and student achievement in an urban setting. *Education, Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 11(2) 143-149.
- International Assoc. for Public Participation. n.d. Core values for the practice of public participation. <http://www.iap2.org/?page=A4>
- P3Architecture Partnership. 2012. Connaught Community School renovation/rebuild Stage One submission document.
- Phipps, A.G. (1993). An institutional analysis of school closures in Saskatoon and Windsor. *Environment and Planning*, 25(11), 1607-1626.
- RealRenewal. 2011. Response to the second biennial review. Presentation to the Regina Board of Education, Sept. 15
- Renn, O., T. Webler, H. Rakel, P. Deniel, & B. Johnson. 1993. Public participation in decision-making: A three-step procedure. *Policy Sciences*. 26, 189-214.
- Sanders, L. 2012. Response to task force questions. Submission to the Joint Task Force on First Nations and Metis Education and Employment. Nov. 27, 2012.
- Spada, V. & J.R. Vreeland. 2013. Who moderates the moderators? The effect of non-neutral moderators in deliberative decision-making. *Journal of Public Deliberation*. 9(2) article 3.