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Working Effectively with Parents - Sometimes Silently

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Abstract
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Working effectively with parents — sometimes silently

Parents are a critical stakeholder in schools, particularly when a leader or governance group needs to make an important decision. What leaders, often times those at the central office, lack are a set of strategies to use with parents other than "let's talk about that."

In Georgia, the City Schools of Decatur Board of Education started to experience a wonderful problem in recent years: too many students. After a decade of declining enrollment, multiple years of 10 percent unexpected growth put leaders on high alert. The Board of Education needed to make a major decision, and they needed to be (1) highly informed and (2) confident that the voices of parents and families permeated their information.

A reconfiguration committee was formed — 40 members strong — from around the district. In typical style, parents, teachers, school-level administrators and district-level administrators composed the group. Since the major recommendation of this group impacted kindergarten through grade five schooling, no students were included in this multimonth venture.
As one might imagine, the group examined enrollment data, real estate data, birth rates, school and lot sizes, and survey results from parents and teachers. The conversations were data-rich and progress was being made: 13 discrete options were on the table after starting with seven. Sometimes the groups used discussion protocols to assure that every voice in the room was heard and that hierarchies (perceived and actual) were broken down.

According to end-of-meeting reflections, the group felt good about their work and each other, but it was now time. Three weeks before the board meeting, this group needed to come to consensus.

In the extensive planning that would occur for these committee gatherings, numerous ideas were discussed about how to build consensus in such a large group. A "chalk talk" floated to the top with the hope that this powerful teaching strategy would be just the right fit for this group.

After the opening business and updating some data tables, the discussion protocol was explained. 20 feet of butcher paper was hung on the cinder-block wall, and each member chose a bleed-resistant colored marker.

The directions were deceivingly simple:

1. Have a conversation about these 13 options, but have your conversation using the tool in your hand.
2. Feel free to post artifacts with tape.
3. Write, read, ask and answer questions.
4. Look for connections and show those connections with lines.
5. No talking — just writing and reading.

With an extra-deep breath, the group was led into the hall to face the giant expanse of paper. In the middle was written: "What is the best option for each student in Decatur?"

Within 30 seconds, some people began writing, and soon multiple people were writing at the same time. The paper flooded with various colors, questions, documents, tables, arrows — even an emoticon or two.

This protocol, or structured conversation, states, "When it's done, it's done." After 25 minutes of productive "talking," two minutes went by without anyone walking to the paper. "Let's take one more minute," was offered to the group.

Finally, the moment of truth: "So, it looks like we have a decision. Let's all say this together: What option are we going to recommend to the Board of Education next month?"

As if they had practiced in a choral reading, the group responded, "Option 13." Spontaneous clapping began as well as accompanying laughter. After eliciting the specific criteria from the chalk talk that made Option 13 the right choice, the group gathered their things and went home.
This case story doesn't imply that chalk talk is the right structure to always use with parents and committees. Instead, an important learning that emerges is the deficit of many central office and school leaders in being an organizational leader.

One of the facets of being an organizational leader aligns with this situation: "District office leaders demonstrate organizational leadership by developing structures, processes, practices, and/or protocols." (Georgia State Superintendent's Association)

One way the Georgia State Superintendent's Association has attended to this dearth is to include numerous experiences in how to use protocols and processes in their District Office Professional Development Program.