

TITLE:

Embracing Public Participation: A whole systems approach to organizational change

CATEGORY:

Organization of the Year

ORGANIZATION:

St. Vrain Valley Public School District

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TITLE	Embracing Public Participation: A whole systems approach to organizational change
ORGANIZING GROUP	St. Vrain Valley Public School District
LOCATION	Longmont, Colorado
KEY QUESTION/PROBLEM	How could a first-time superintendent and a new communications director launch a sustainable culture of public participation in a large public school district, overcoming internal resistance from legacy staff, and external resistance from stakeholders who've grown distrustful, embittered, alienated or ambivalent?
SAMPLE METHODS	An 8-year, step-by-step, process of organizational change using 1) P2 training for stakeholders and staff 2) routine use of public deliberation as a means of working through complex and controversial problems, and 3) rewriting institutional policies to reflect the value of public participation and deliberation.
RESULTS	The St. Vrain Valley School District transformed from a low-performing, underfunded, and widely criticized public school district to a national model of institutional excellence. The district now has broad community support, a leadership team committed to public participation as an institutional value, and a growing population of trained and engaged stakeholders.
IMPACT LEVEL	St. Vrain Valley Schools has been recognized for successfully shifting its culture of communication from a PR model of engagement to a P2 model. Numerous school districts in the U.S. now seek out St. Vrain administrators for guidance on introducing the same internal and external change interventions in their districts.
TIME FRAME	2008 – 2015
PEOPLE ENGAGED	St. Vrain's entire community of public school stakeholders including parents, teachers and staff, senior citizens, business and municipal leaders, and elected officials.
WEB LINK	www.svvsd.org

"The work being done in St. Vrain Valley School District is a great example of how schools and districts can build partnerships that create world-class education and training programs."

Cecilia Muñoz

Director, White House Domestic Policy Council

Public Participation Challenges and Opportunities

St. Vrain Valley Schools, Colorado's 7th largest public school district, has over 32,000 PreK-12 students, 53 schools, and serves 8 municipalities across 411 square miles of Colorado's Front Range region. St. Vrain's mission is to provide all children a comprehensive 21st century education and prepare them for success in postsecondary education and career training, while being a positive force for economic development in the region.

Like many school districts across the United States, St. Vrain is faced with a host of serious issues, complicated by decades of state/federal budget cuts and unfunded "school reform" mandates. St. Vrain serves a growing population of students and families living in poverty, and students whose primary language is not English. The district also serves a growing number of families with disabled students.

In today's polarized political climate, politicians and pundits often blame public education for society's ills while simultaneously advocating for interests counter to schools' success. All too frequently, the legislative solutions imposed on schools – notwithstanding grandiose titles such as the federal government's *No Child Left Behind Act* or Colorado's *Student Success Act* – are approved without a hint of public deliberation or reliable data. Unfortunately, much of today's education policy represents a solution in search of a problem.

Equally dysfunctional, but found within the ranks of public educators, is the belief that school administrators are *the education experts* and should be able to do their work unhindered by the public. St. Vrain leaders once dismissed the public as non-expert and unqualified to participate in district problem solving. Fortunately for St. Vrain, those days are over, but many districts still cling to a "decide, announce and defend" paradigm of leadership and governance.

At St. Vrain, a new superintendent understood that the district would only experience more isolation and failure without the knowledge and trust of its community. He seized the opportunity to transform the district's culture because working in isolation did not serve the best interests of the students, parents, employees, and the community at large. This was the opportunity for change, the opportunity to build an authentic culture of public participation.

Rationale for Public Participation

After years of exclusionary decision making, administrative obfuscation and a financial crisis, St. Vrain's public had turned its back on the school district. Matters worsened when experienced teachers and staff left for positions outside the district, the media became openly hostile and citizens rejected ballot initiatives to increase financial support for schools.

A newly hired first-time superintendent and his communications director, recognized that the bond of trust that should have existed between St. Vrain and its public was broken, and that the district had to initiate a systematic and sustained shift in practice to win back its public. What

followed was an 8-year long process of engaging the public and embedding the values of public participation into the district's operational and organizational culture.

The rationale for implementing public participation was simple. The old St. Vrain had lost its way: it ran out of resources and tried to navigate the turbulent seas of change on its own. By engaging its stakeholder, and including them in district problem solving and decision making, St. Vrain would seek to regain public trust, reach better, more sustainable decisions, increase buy-in for its policies and practices, and set a new course for the future.

Impact of Core Values on the Organization

Embedding public participation into the district's operational and organizational culture has been incremental, beginning with small successes in deliberative public forums, increasing staff and stakeholder capacity through training and slowly embedding the practice and values of public participation into the culture.

While the internal change initiative has been a prolonged process, the impact on external stakeholders was more immediate. The following example provides a glimpse of the change in practice:

Fall, 2007: An administrator, perched behind a podium in a school auditorium, informs parents and educators how teacher positions and instructional programs would be cut as a result of state funding reductions. The plan was crafted by school administrators without the input of teachers, staff, parents and other stakeholders. The meeting deteriorated into a contentious shouting match.

Spring, 2009: When faced with another round of state budget cuts, the district's planning process included public focus groups, paper and online surveys, dozens of face-to-face informational meetings held at schools, churches and businesses throughout the community, a live-streamed public forum designed and facilitated by an experienced public participation professional, and a committee of citizens tasked with summarizing extensive input and presenting a final set of recommendations to the Board of Education.

In the ensuing years, the role of public participation in St. Vrain has steadily increased, but not without resistance and setbacks. As the single largest employer in the region, with an extensive network of departments and employee groups, the district has introduced change at a pace that would increase the likelihood for understanding, acceptance and ownership.

Since 2008, St. Vrain has deepened its commitment to public participation and deliberative problem solving. The impacts to its operational and organizational cultures have been substantive and implemented thoughtfully to optimize long-term buy-in. Some of the steps taken to strengthen the district's capacity of public participation include:

Lead staff training: In 2009, St. Vrain sent its communication director to Arlington, Virginia for a week of IAP2 foundation-level training with long-time IAP2 trainer, Doug Sarno. This was a significant step: the budget for training funds had been eliminated and with the superintendent's support, an exception was made for the prohibition of out-of-state travel. In 2013, the director attended John Godec's course on emotion and outrage.

Parent and administrator training: The district created a year-long parent training

program known as Leadership St. Vrain, to empower parents and others with detailed information about school district operations (know-how), and meaningful relationships with administrators and state education leaders (know-who).

This program, originally designed for the benefit of parents and other external stakeholders has also evolved into a training tool for administrative staff, and includes public participation training and facilitated deliberation processes led by an experienced, IAP2-trained practitioner from Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation.

St. Vrain parents have participated in public participation workshops and trainings by IAP2 and the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation. In June, 2015, a St. Vrain parent will travel to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to participate in the IAP2 Foundations Certificate Training, and St. Vrain has already scheduled two public participation trainings for parents and administrators for the 2015-16 school year.

P2 process facilitation: St. Vrain routinely relies on independent P2 practitioners to facilitate its public deliberative processes. This includes a robust process of issue framing, public information, outreach to impacted stakeholder groups, support services such as translators and childcare for access and inclusivity, and follow-up meetings.

Job reorganization: Recognizing that the district's culture of community engagement was shifting from a PR model to a P2 culture, the superintendent elevated the communications director, now St. Vrain's lead P2 professional, to executive director of organizational development and communications, a cabinet-level leadership position.

Policy modifications: In the fall of 2014, the Board of Education of St. Vrain Valley Schools initiated the process of revising its board policies. As part of this effort, a new policy, *KCB–Public Participation in Decision Making*, has been submitted for a final review by the Colorado Association of School Boards.

Changes have also been incorporated into the Department of Communications to include a commitment to public participation and deliberative problem solving and decision-making processes as central to its mission and values. Despite these tangible accomplishments in solidifying the core values of public participation into St. Vrain's culture, there is more work to be done.

St. Vrain is having an impact on other districts in and outside Colorado. Superintendents, school communication professionals, board members, parents and business leaders from around the state and nation routinely contact St. Vrain administrators, board members and parents for advice on how to improve their district's relationship with their community. In fact, in Colorado alone, ten school districts are duplicating St. Vrain's public participation training program and practices.

Additionally, St. Vrain has partnered with professors from Colorado State University and the University of Northern Colorado to carry out a multi-district, mixed-methods research study on the implementation of public participation training in other school communities. The study is expected by October 2015.

Evaluation against Core Values

The most significant impact of public participation at St. Vrain has been the marked increase in community trust for the district and its leadership. Because the superintendent expects that the district act as a partner with its stakeholders, and recognize their indispensable role as problem solvers and decision makers, support for the district is higher than ever.

At St. Vrain, groups of parents and other stakeholders routinely participate in robust deliberative processes, influencing important decisions related to many aspects of district operations and policy. The following are some issues submitted for public deliberation by St. Vrain stakeholders:

Security: In the wake of the Sandy Hook tragedy, parents recommended that the board not seek to permit armed teachers and staff but strengthen existing security measures.

Budget Cuts: In the case of managing state budget cuts, parents recommended raising average classroom size district-wide rather than eliminate teacher positions.

Facilities: With legacy schools, parents recommended closing two neighborhood schools and investing in the renovation and expansion of another area school.

Technology: In advance of a one-to-one technology rollout, parents recommended the creation of annual “Camp iPad” training programs to support parents and teachers.

New Funding: In response to enrollment growth, parents determined the size and scope of ballot initiatives for capital improvements, programs and staff retention.

In every instance, each of the core values of public participation played a meaningful part of the process. In one case, during an extended series of public meetings on the topic of capital funding needs for the district, the stakeholders took complete ownership of the design and facilitation of the meeting.

Equally strong evidence that the core values of public participation have influenced St. Vrain is found in a mixed-methods research study conducted in 2012.

An anonymous online survey asked parents who participated in the district’s public participation training to rate their agreement to the following statements:

To some degree, it is my experience from the training that:

1. I know that finding solutions to school district-related challenges, requires making very difficult choices.
2. I have a greater understanding of parents whose perspectives on education-related issues are different than mine.
3. I believe that if parents with different perspectives are involved in solving school district-related challenges, we’ll get better solutions.
4. Even though a parent might have a completely different position from mine about an education-related issue, I believe we could reach a consensus.

5. I understand that finding solutions to controversial problems frequently means having uncomfortable conversations with people I disagree with.

The research was intended to measure the impact of parent understanding of the values of public participation after the training. The collective responses were overwhelmingly positive, with between 85-97 percent of the parents marking agree or strongly agree.

As a direct result of St. Vrain's restored community trust, voters passed a capital improvement bond (\$189 million) and two mill levy overrides (approx. \$30 million annually) at a time when such ballot initiatives were failing in unprecedented numbers. In addition to building new schools and renovating existing schools, these funds have allowed the district to make substantial investments in cutting-edge technology and high-rigor instructional focus programs such as STEM, IB, Medical & Biosciences, Aerospace, Energy & Engineering and Performing Arts.

The partnership and trust that St. Vrain has built with its community can be attributed in great part to its growing commitment to the values of public participation. Not surprising, the district has simultaneously experienced unprecedented success in nearly every aspect of its work. Some of these achievements include:

- Colorado's only *Invest in Innovation* grant winner (2010)
- Colorado's only *Race to the Top* grant (\$16.5 M) winner (2012)
- St. Vrain named *Large Business of the Year* by Longmont Chamber (2012)
- Superintendent Haddad named *National Superintendent of the Year* (2013)
- St. Vrain Board of Education named *State Board of the Year* (2013)
- St. Vrain wins IAP2 USA & International Research Project Awards (2014)
- Supt. Haddad named *National Connected Superintendent* recipient (2014)
- Supt. Haddad identified as a *Leader to Learn From* by Education Week (2015)
- St. Vrain Parent Laura McDonald named *Education Pacesetter of the Year* for her work in public participation and education advocacy (2015)

St. Vrain's greatest accomplishment has been the academic achievement and success of its students. Over the past 8 years, St. Vrain students have continued to deliver an upward trend in standardized test scores, increased graduation percentages, decreased numbers of students dropping out, and increasing scholarship awards.

The district's success has also been recognized by state and national leaders including President Barak Obama, Assistant to the President and Director of White House Domestic Policy Council Cecilia Muñoz, U.S. Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper, and Colorado Senate President Brandon Shaffer.

The motivation for embedding the core values into St. Vrain's operational and organizational culture is summarized by Superintendent Don Haddad in this way, *"Never before have I seen so many competing interests, so many people with different viewpoints, ways in which they view the world, ways in which they think we should approach public education. And as a leader, what I've come to understand clearly, is that in order to make the best and most sound decisions, it's absolutely critical to involve all your stakeholders."*

The impact on St. Vrain stakeholders is best captured by a parent who said this when asked about other districts she had experienced: *"They don't want input and they don't want squeaky wheels. I think our district is different that way."*

2009-2015 public participation within

St. Vrain Valley Schools



Leadership St. Vrain

Each year, a cohort of St. Vrain parents and staff engage in a formal training program that includes public participation training.



Budget Crisis

Community-wide deliberation forum on district response to state budget cuts; includes online surveys, live streamed public forum, professional P2 facilitation.



Managing Growth

Residents of Erie community deliberate on population growth and impacts associated with a new elementary school including boundaries, traffic and safety.



School Security

In the wake of Sandy Hook's tragedy, parents, teachers, administrators, students and police work through competing interests of school security and learning environment.



1:1 Technology Plan

Parents from across the district work through concerns and create recommendations for the implementation of plan to provide every middle and high schooler a tablet.



Parent Leaders

Parent volunteer Laura McDonald named Daily Camera Pacesetter of the Year for leadership in public participation, engagement and education advocacy at the state capitol.

"In order to make the best and most sound decisions, its absolutely critical to involve all of your stakeholders." - Don Haddad, Ed.D., Superintendent