Governance support resources
Community consultation

Boards often ask NZSTA Advisory & Support Centre how best to consult with their communities to assess views on a range of issues.

Consultation can collect much positive information, but to ensure an effective consultation process, here are some pointers for the board.

Why consult?

Legal obligations to consult

A board's legal requirement to consult is spelt out in relatively few situations.

Examples include:

- Commitment to the intent of Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- Adopting or revoking a cohort entry policy for new entrants (section 5C Education Act);
- Developing or reviewing its enrolment scheme (section 11H Education Act);
- Treatment of its health curriculum – consultation is required at least every two years (section 60B Education Act);
- Considering varying school hours on a permanent basis (section 65B(3) Education Act); and
- Consult with the school's Maori community when developing policies, plans and targets to improve the progress and achievement of Maori students (section 60A(c) Education Act and National Administration Guideline 1).

Not spelt out, but a legal obligation all the same

The board is a Crown Entity that is also subject to many of the responsibilities of local authorities. This includes a responsibility to consult whenever it is developing or reviewing critical aspects of its operations, and as part of ensuring key educational and administrative responsibilities are met.

Here are some examples.

Natural justice principles

The principles of natural justice, which include fairness, mean it is wise for boards to consult with their communities whenever it is in the process of making decisions which will strongly impact on its students and their families and whanau.

Communities that have not been consulted before a controversial decision by the board would have good reason to challenge the decision the High Court and the Office of the Ombudsman.

Community consultation and community engagement

Community consultation is an important aspect of community engagement. The Education Review Office defines this in the following way:

Community engagement is 'meaningful, respectful partnership between schools and their parents, whānau, and communities...focused on improving the educational experiences and successes for each child'.

The Education Review Office includes "Educationally powerful connections and relationships" in Domain 3 of its process indicators, and it goes on to state:

> Parents and whānau are the primary and ongoing influence on the development, learning, wellbeing and self-efficacy of their children. So it is important that schools engage with them and involve them in school activities, particularly those that are focused on learning.

It is significant that community engagement is one of the eight principles in the New Zealand Curriculum for curriculum decision making:

> The curriculum has meaning for students, connects with their wider lives, and engages the *support of their families*, whānau, and communities.

Community consultation and board operations, policies and procedures

Community consultation is also a critical part of the board's operations – for instance:

- during its charter and strategic plan development and update process,
- and as part of its self-review and policy review processes.

Many boards have a community consultation policy, or provide for community consultation as part of specific policies. Examples could include:

- Reporting to students, parents and community on achievement policy
- Maori student achievement policy
- Special education needs policy
- Treaty of Waitangi and Maori Partnership policy

If the board is concerned that there is a sense of discontent in its school community, or a major change process is about to take place, a careful consultation process could be useful.

What about consultation when the board has concerns about what is going on in the school – with the principal, for instance - which it hopes will provide it with ammunition to deal with this perceived problem? Community consultation is not the way to deal with those kinds of concerns. Using consultation processes for this reason quite rightly risks making staff suspicious and defensive.

What does the board want to know?

Avoid a wide range of subjects in the consultation

Once the board has decided it needs or wants to consult, we recommend that it limits the topics covered in any consultation. This avoids, for instance, an overlong survey that people don't end up completing and too much data that is not then able to be put to good use.

Avoid questions about things the board has no choice about providing

It is also wise to only ask questions about issues where community feedback can affect an outcome. For instance, the board is required to ensure the delivery of the curriculum. So, even if all the survey respondents agree the school should stop teaching music to allow more time for maths, the school cannot implement such a change.

Who is the board going to consult?

Student voice

Boards are generally used to consulting with parents and staff. There is also now increasing attention being given to ensuring 'student voice' about decisions that affect them.

Consulting with students ensures that the rights recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are respected. New Zealand is a signatory to this convention. Examples where this is useful would be to ensure a safe school environment, including one that is free from bullying, and improving facilities students will use.

Numbers and range of those to be consulted

The smaller the number to be consulted, then the higher the chance of an error. For example, if there are fifteen families in the school community the board might want to hear from all fifteen in order to ensure it has covered all the bases.

On the other hand, if there are 3000 families in the school community, and the board has done a random sample of 300 families (10%), then provided they all respond, the chances are it has a reasonably good picture.

If the board chooses a sampling method that doesn't include everyone, it is still free to make a general invitation, through the school newsletter, for any other parents interested in participating.

How is the board going to consult?

A survey

Boards' main way of consulting seems to be through a survey that goes out to everyone. Surveys have their uses but they can be costly, time consuming, may have a low response rate, and may not actually tell the board what it wants to know. An online survey may also not be anonymous.

Other options

- a focus group where a random sample is taken from the school roll and personal invitations are sent to the sample group to come and discuss the key questions the board has identified;
- a group of people doing on the spot interviews at an already established event. For example, parent teacher interviews;
- a telephone survey. This may need some pre-warning through school newsletters and however else the school communicates with its community;
- an "exit" survey of parents who have decided their children are to leave the school; and
- the board might get more and better quality responses from two questions once a term on the bottom of the school newsletter than a three page questionnaire once a year.

Any barriers to participation in the consultation process?

The board could also brainstorm possible barriers to participation by its school families in a consultation exercise, and how those barriers could be overcome.

Having meetings at different times of the day would recognise parents' employment responsibilities, such as shift work; offering childcare for younger children might encourage participation by full-time parents;

Having someone else to ask the questions and record the answers, or survey questions in languages other than English relevant to the parent community might encourage people with literacy issues, and speakers of languages other than English to respond.

Fine-tuning the consultation process

Once the board is clear about why it wants to consult, what it wants to know about, who it is going to ask, and how it might go about asking them, the next step is to look at the specifics of how it is going to collect that data. Here are some tips.

Asking questions in the "right" way

The saying is "lies, damn lies, and statistics", and it is certainly possible to create a survey form or interview questionnaire that will get answers the board wants to hear rather than the "truth".

For example, here are two different ways the board could frame a question about ICT:

Version one

Next year we are continuing to develop our information and communications technology programme. Do you think the school should buy:

A. 15 new computers?

B. 10 new computers and budget for networking the entire school?

C. 10 new computers, a digital camera, and scanner?

Version two

A major goal of the board over the past few years has been to improve the provision of information and communications technology. This has included networking the school, increasing the number of computers available, and improving our software. In your opinion how do you think the school is doing in this area?

| Still way behind other schools | 1 2 3 4 5 | Best facilities in the area |
| Not enough emphasis on ICT | 1 2 3 4 5 | Too much emphasis on ICT |

Have you any other comments?

There could be times when version one would be appropriate. For example, when the PTA has raised a sum of money to contribute towards computers and the whole parent community has already clearly identified this as a priority.

However, version one assumes that the goal of improving ICT is shared by the whole school community, while version two allows room for a range of views. The "openness" of version two is more effective for board consultation focused on strategic priorities. However, version two is not a "perfect" model question either, because it is values based.

Ensuring a response

Include relevant background information

It can be useful for a survey, for instance, to "remind" its community of background information to increase the chance of a more informed response. For example, if the board is consulting on its strategic plan, it could summarise an aspect of the strategy as part of a question. It could also include a cover page to the questionnaire which highlights key goals.

Keep it simple

Multi choice, Likert scale or open ended questions?
For quick results multi choice, or a Likert scale (for example, the 1-5 range in the example above) are user friendly and easy to translate into data. Answering two or three questions of that kind can also get people eased into what they think about a topic so when they come to "comments" they may have something to add.
There are other forms of consultation where asking several open ended questions can generate good feedback in a way a scale cannot. Example: the board is considering developing its outdoor areas.

What do you think are the best aspects of our school playground areas?

What are the areas you would like to see improved?

Have you noticed anything about our school outdoor areas that have caused you to feel concern for child safety?

These kinds of questions could even have a sketch or photograph of the playground as it is currently. The questions also show the board is interested in a range of parent opinion.

Tailor to your school community

Consider the language of the questionnaire. For example, are the questions easy to understand? Rather than use words like "literacy" and "numeracy" the consultation could use "reading" and "numbers". Sometimes it is useful to have someone available to ask questions and write the answers for the person being consulted. This might encourage greater participation from people who are not confident with literacy or who are verbally fluent in English but not confident writing in English.

Ideally the main body of the questionnaire (before people add comments) should be able to be answered in ten to fifteen minutes. Ways to shoulder tap people have already been mentioned, but also think about communication challenges the board might face with its school community. A high decile school might find they get a better response rate to a survey by asking parents to log into their website and request the survey by email. Against that option, is the difficulty with making an email response anonymous.

The board of a low decile provincial school might find it works to have a trusted member of their school community visit a random sample of families. Or, since many families may not have telephones, if there is a widely listened-to community radio station the board could use the station's community noticeboard service.

Test drive the questions

Test out the questionnaire by, for example, giving the questions to board members or even people who have nothing to do with the school to answer. This helps prevent questions that assume prior knowledge or use jargon not all the school community will understand.

Provide incentives to respond

The board could also encourage responses with a prize draw that everyone who replies is entered into. Ideally survey forms are anonymous so if it does this, have a cover slip for a contact name that gets detached and entered in the prize draw box.

For schools which choose to survey students it is a good idea for a group of senior students to do the distribution and collection – even when the survey does not have their name on it many students are wary of a staff member recognising their handwriting.

Feed the consultation results back to the community

Make sure the board feeds back the results of its consultation exercise to the community.

If there has been a high level of requests on an issue that is difficult for the board to action, eg, a major classroom redevelopment, tell people that the request has been noted but is not achievable in the short to medium term.

Letting the school community know the results of the process, and if possible any impact that has been made on board decision making, will encourage participants to feel the effort they put into responding was valued, and they are likely to be receptive the next time the board decides to consult.

More resources

Part 2: Application of Administrative Law — Office of the Auditor-General New Zealand

The work of school boards – trustees' perspectives: Findings from the NZCER national survey of primary and intermediate schools 2016 | New Zealand Council for Educational Research. See pages 17 – 21

Office of the Children's Commissioner

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) - Ministry of Social Development

NZSTA Nationally Advertised Workshop *Your Community: Engagement, Concerns and Complaints*

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Where do I get advice?

The *Governance advisory and support centre* advisers can also assist and are contacted on 0800 782 435, option 1 or govadvice@nzsta.org.nz

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