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School and Community Relations in the Kansans Can School Redesign Project

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Since July of 2017, approximately 72 Kansas school districts and approximately 183 schools have volunteered to redesign their schools around four redesign principles as part of the Kansans Can School Redesign Project. These redesign principles are Personalized Learning, Real World Application, Student Success Skills, and Family/Business/Community Engagement. They originated and were codified from data collected from the Kansas Children, Kansas' Future Community Conversation Tour in 2015. During that tour, over 2,000 Kansans in 20 communities provided feedback regarding the role of K-12 education in preparing the successful Kansas high school graduate (Neuenswander, 2018). The oversite of the Kansans Can School Redesign Project is the responsibility of the Redesign Project Team of the Kansas State Department of Education. This team is made up of the Deputy Commissioner of Learning Services, two Redesign Specialists, a Redesign Coordinator, and one other KSDE consultant.

The earliest cohort of volunteer schools, named the Mercury and Gemini I Projects, were led by the two KSDE redesign specialists through a planning process that included engaging community stakeholders in developing a shared vision for their redesigned and innovative school. Many of the earliest launch schools proved to be very successful in engaging stakeholders to collect authentic feedback early in the process. However, even with these attempts, some school districts were surprised by pushback from stakeholders early in the implementation phase of the Redesign. This paper will review pertinent literature regarding best practices for family, school, and community engagement when initiating major change initiatives. The section entitled "A Tale of Two Districts" will describe scenarios from details that took place in several redesign districts. The conclusion will be a reflection by the author, who is one of the redesign specialists, on lessons learned, that may help to inform future schools who are attempting a large-scale innovation.

Review of the Literature

The fields of education, child welfare, child psychology, and social work have created decades of research on the importance of family and community engagement (Mallon, 2004). Federal and state laws require parent and family engagement. The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), which sets the standards for family engagement that are included in federal laws, has been in existence since 1897, well over 120 years (National Parent Teacher Association, 2019). Professional standards for education administrators outline family and community engagement as an essential element for successful schools. Decades of research have shown that when families are engaged in their children's education, outcomes for their children are much better (Weiss et al., 2010).

For schools in Kansas, engaging families in decision-making is not a choice; it is required by law. Section 1118 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the federal law for Title I funding, views parent involvement as participation of parents in regular, two-way, and

meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring:

- That parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning;
- That parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school;
- That parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child (Kansas State Department of Education, 2019; Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 1965).

Kansas state statute requires that each school in every district establishes a school site council composed of the principal, teachers, school personnel, parents of the students attending the school, and other community members; to provide advice and counsel regarding school performance goals and objectives; and to make recommendations regarding budget decisions. They may also make recommendations to the school board regarding identifying and implementing best practices for school management and instruction (School District Finance and Quality Performance, 2012).

Two sets of professional standards exist to guide school professionals to make decisions regarding high-quality family engagement, the National PTA standards, and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. The National PTA standards, which are the basis for the requirements outlined in section 1118 of ESEA, are to be implemented by all schools that receive federal Title I money. There are six PTA standards for family-school partnerships. Of those six, Standard 2 describes communicating effectively with families. Standard 5 describes sharing power so that families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children. Standard 6 focuses on collaborating with the community to connect all partners "to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation" (National Parent Teacher Association, 2002). Standard 8 of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders states that "Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

The National Policy Forum for Family, School, & Community Engagement (FSCE) published a comprehensive framework entitled *Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement (FSCE) as an Integral Part of Education Reform* in 2010. The authors state that supporting 21st Century learners requires that schools engage FSCE in ways that are more interactive and authentic. The report lays out components of FSCE that move family participation from parent communication to authentic family engagement (Weiss et al., 2010). However, it falls short of showing school leaders how to move a community from the traditional ways of communication to more robust and meaningful engagement. That report, which some may consider a modern text, was published over ten years ago!

In February of 2017, researchers at the Nellie Mae Education Foundation published a literature review entitled, *How Family, School, and Community Engagement Can Improve Student Achievement and Influence School Reform.* The findings outline eleven different topics, from social networks and parent classes to family educational goals and values. The literature review

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included studies from around the world. While some strategies, such as tips for using social media, may be helpful in Kansas, some of the recommendations from research done in Switzerland or Finland may be dependent on local cultural norms and societal expectations and not transferrable to Kansas, U.S.A. In this report, only one portion discusses school-family-community partnerships (Wood & Bauman, 2017).

Also published in 2017 was another framework entitled *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework.* The Center on School Turnaround at WestEd published this document. The Center is part of a federally funded network of comprehensive centers designed to provide technical assistance to State Education Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) on evidence-based practices that support schools receiving federal (Title and IDEA) funds. In other words, this center is a voice of authority from the U.S. Department of Education. This document describes four domains, and Domain 4 is Culture Shift. Embedded in this section are three paragraphs on soliciting and acting on stakeholder input (McCauley, 2018). Again, this mentions that getting stakeholder input is essential to shift the culture of a building. However, as a framework, it falls short of giving practical advice regarding how to solicit input or how frequently to solicit such input.

One lesson learned from the early Kansas redesign schools is that the traditional strategies and structures for engaging families and community members are inadequate when schools are redesigning their systems to move away from tightly held and highly regarded traditions. Sending notes in a backpack, or hosting informational meetings do not reach the majority of parents. Schools were sometimes tempted to settle for giving parents information and being satisfied with an "at least we tried" attitude when low numbers of parents showed up to informational meetings. That turned out to be shortsighted. Schools that Redesign must take the steps necessary to radically "redesign" how they were engaging families and the greater school community (Ferlazzo, 2011). As important as family engagement is to education, families are part of a broader set of external stakeholders that make up the support network of a school community. This broader community, with locally unique social and political nuances, should be a tremendous asset to the local schools. Having high-quality schools adds value to the quality of life in a community (Fiore, 2016).

Another Look at Community Engagement

In the book *Democratic Schools: Lessons from the Chalkface,* Chapter 1, the case is made for why schools should be models of democracy. Central concerns and conditions for democratic schools include:

1. Safe environments that encourage the open flow of two-way dialogue, regardless of popularity, so that the public is fully informed
2. The common faith of stakeholders in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems
3. The use of discussion structures that allow for critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies
4. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good."
5. The concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities

6. A common understanding that democracy is not an "ideal" to be pursued, but an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people.
7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life (Beane & Apple, 2007).

The authors, Beane and Apple caution that attempts to engage stakeholders must be genuine and represent more than efforts to enlist community support for predetermined decisions. Being inauthentic or operating as a "democratic dictatorship" where school leaders ultimately retain all of the control for decisions despite the premise of community engagement stands in the way of transparency and true collaboration and feels to stakeholders like the "engineering of consent" (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007).

The book, *School-Community Relations,* by Douglas J. Fiore, takes a different approach. In the book, family engagement is defined as one part of the social and political climate of the community. Major civic, cultural, and religious organizations can be conduits of communication (or miscommunication) to a broader group of citizens. Business and community leaders are often parents, have a tremendous amount of influence, and can be beneficial in helping to share the attitudes and beliefs of other parents with the school. Community members who no longer have children in school are still taxpayers and have a tremendous amount of social capital and voting influence. Fiore states that in order to fully and meaningfully engage all stakeholders, it is *essential* that the district and school have a modern and specific communication plan that includes using multiple applications of social media. (Fiore, 2016).

Communications

School districts of any size should have a clear and specific communication plan with specific tasks assigned to people who will be held accountable for their roles. This plan should provide messages to the public via a variety of media and social media. Public opinion and perceptions about its schools' matter, and it is the responsibility of school and district leaders to ensure that the public is correctly informed, not passively involved. "While access to information is virtually limitless, so is access to misinformation" (Fiore, 2016). Fiore emphasizes that in the age of instant information (i.e., social media), school leaders need to know their public, work with them and guard against sliding into a democratic dictatorship (Beane & Apple, 2007; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). A focus on public relations, however, is not sufficient in modern times. A public relations plan may keep the community informed, but it does little to empower community members to have a say in decision-making or to support students directly. Schools need to have a coordinated school-community relations plan that outlines a strategy for two-way communication and a structure for obtaining feedback. Considerations for such a plan are:

- Is the plan simple, straightforward, and easy to manage, even if the district does not have a full-time position dedicated to community relations?
- Is the plan visible? Is the information distributed in such a way that the public knows how and when to access it?
- Are there accountable outcomes that are measurable?
- Is the plan succinct and accessible to broad audiences (Fiore, 2016)

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In the optimum communication plan, the district coordinates messages to the community regarding big-picture information, and individual buildings communicate messages specific to their students; however, this can be challenging in large districts. A centralized plan puts the superintendent's office in charge, and messages are geared towards groups of stakeholders; however, it is difficult to consider the needs of the individual schools. A decentralized plan, where buildings are the primary messengers to stakeholders, can lead to inconsistency throughout the district and may leave the district office out of the loop (Fiore, 2016). In the case of the early redesign schools, some who experienced the most pushback were in districts where there was not a structured school-community relations plan. Some districts functioned with an antiquated method of communication that did not account for the speed of social media, which opened the door for misinformation to flow faster than accurate information.

Relationships

Even with the most precisely executed communication plan, mistakes will happen, and misinformation will get out into the community, which is why building and maintaining positive relationships is essential (Beane & Apple, 2007, 2007; Groff, 2014; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007; Weiss et al., 2010). With positive relationships, when misinformation does start, stakeholders will likely give the schools the benefit of the doubt or will feel safe enough to ask questions. It is important to remember, too, that misinformation may start with an uninformed or disgruntled school employee (Fiore, 2016).

Schools have an internal public and an external public, and relationships with both must be cultivated and nurtured over time for the betterment of the entire system. The internal public consists of students and all certified and classified staff. Relationships between the principal and all staff are the key to building a collaborative school culture (Teasley, 2017) The principal is the ultimate role model for students and teachers. She should exemplify and model the school's vision and values in every interaction. Her actions, attitudes, and written and verbal communications have a direct impact on the attitudes and behaviors of students and staff (Balyer, 2012; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). The internal public is a crucial part of successful school-community relations. As staff and students interact with their families and social connections, they become a conduit of communication as well. The staff has a responsibility to make sure anytime they speak about their school that they do so, "...positively and factually" (Fiore, 2016).

The external public is precisely that – everyone else who likely has an opinion about the local school but does not spend time at the school every day. The external public includes families, businesses, and other community members who may not have children in school. Relationships with parents should be warm, inviting, and focused on the care and support of their child (Baker et al., 2016; Ferrara, 2011; McCauley, 2018; National Parent Teacher Association, 2002). Other vital stakeholders that schools would be wise to tap into are the key communicators. Every community has them. The local newspaper editor, a high-volume realtor, the Chamber of Commerce, the Ministerial Alliance, and law enforcement are key communicators because their regular interactions connect them with dozens of people *daily*. If these key communicators are equipped with current, relevant, and factual information, they will spread that information. However, if they have the wrong information, that too will spread. The other option is that key

communicators have no information, and schools have missed an opportunity to spread the news. These key communicators should have relationships with district and school leaders that enable them to have quick access when questions or incongruent information arises (Fiore, 2016).

Schools who were in the early phases of Kansans Can Redesign were knowledgeable about the importance of family engagement, and many relied on existing communication structures to carry the message. School leaders could have benefitted from research and strategies taken from other professions, such as public relations, politics, communications, and maybe even marketing. Early volunteer schools needed to be well versed in the effective use of media, social media, and social relationships.

The following are syntheses of real-life scenarios created by the author, who is the Elementary Redesign Specialist for KSDE. These scenarios are not intended to be read as a literal record of how actual circumstances unfolded. The scenarios do describe exemplary tactics used and errors made by schools in the early redesign cohorts. All names in the scenarios are pseudonyms.

A Tale of Two Districts: The Adams School District

The Adams school district is in a mid-sized Kansas town with a strong sense of community pride. The Adams district has one high school, one middle school, and a handful of elementary schools. They committed to redesigning one high school and one elementary school and had a loose plan to spread Redesign to their other buildings over time. The majority of the citizens in Adams, KS are middle-class, and conservative. This town has always been proud of their schools. The citizens believe their community is the best in the state. They do not know that their schools are underperforming, compared to other similar communities. The community has no reason to think that their schools need to be "redesigned." When this district decided to join the Redesign Project, the school leaders and staff wanted to be on the leading edge of education in Kansas. The two schools that started to redesign easily procured a better than 80% vote of certified staff, a letter of support from their local teacher negotiating organization, and a letter of support from their local board.

Before Redesign, schools in the district were trying to address some of the social-emotional needs of students. Like many communities in Kansas, this community has a growing drug problem. This drug culture is bringing new people to town who do not share the same middle-class values as the majority. There is an increasing number of children from families of poverty and children who rate highly in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that "ACEs are linked to risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, low life potential, and early death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019)."

Initially, the two schools in the Adams District solicited feedback from students and families. For example, Adams Elementary has always had an active site-council and good family participation, so folding redesign topics into existing communication and collaboration structures was a natural fit. Adams Elementary kicked off the discussion with a family night were approximately 100 families (a good turnout) were informed about the redesign project. The participants were also asked two simple questions:

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1.) What do you like about our school and want to see more of?
2.) What would you like to see changed to give your child a better learning experience?

Families could write their short responses on sticky notes and turn them in as their ticket for the pizza line. The school was abuzz, and families were excited that their children would be part of a "redesigned" school, even though they did not know what that would entail. The data showed that parents wanted their children to have hands-on learning experiences, and while parents did not use the term "rigorous," they wanted their children to learn what is needed to be successful in life beyond high school. The schools also surveyed their students and asked them questions such as, "What do you like about school?" and "If you could imagine your perfect day of learning, what would that look like?"

Adams Elementary School started strong, engaging their families, which created much excitement. Teachers, with the leadership of principals, set out to brainstorm possibilities, research strategies, and prototype and test those strategies to see what would align with the feedback from families and the needs of the students. After dozens of hours of research, the schools arrived at their redesign strategies, developed a plan for implementing those strategies, and took it back to their local board. The step they did not take, though, was to include students and families in the brainstorming, researching, or selection of strategies. They also had no input or communication with the community beyond school families. The school did not ask the community for feedback on their plan before asking the board for approval. Instead of true collaboration throughout the process, as Bean and Apple (2007) describe, it appears that perhaps the district and school mistakenly engineered the consent of their stakeholders. When parents learned of some of the approved strategies in the plan, many of them had questions, but there was not a mechanism in place for them to voice their concerns or ask questions. The result was that questions of the stakeholders remained, and throughout the launch year, those questions grew into doubts and festered into disagreements. Misinformed citizens voiced their confusion and frustration at monthly board meetings, which became extremely stressful for district leaders and the local board. After a few months of discord, one of the redesign principals began a plan to invite each family who expressed dissatisfaction to come to the school, observe students, and ask any questions. He and his staff went out of their way to make sure families understood that their children were cared for and that the data showed that they were learning. Many of the families changed their opinions, but some did not.

A year later, this school saw an increase in students scoring at the highest levels on state assessments, behavior referrals are significantly lower, children are happy to come to school, and families are happy and proud of the schools. The principals and teachers are wiser and have different mechanisms in place to keep the greater community informed and engaged. These different mechanisms include having students lead school tours and showcase their projects to parents and visitors. They use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to promote how students are learning, and they use a secure app to send parents daily photos of their child learning and engaged at school. They strategically use events that are highly attended by parents, such as music programs, to briefly inform, or collect survey feedback. They have maintained their open-door policy for community visitors, and routinely invite community members when students showcase their learning projects.

A Tale of Two Districts: The Hidden Creek School District

The Hidden Creek School District is a small, 1A district with one elementary (PreK-8) school and one high school. They function as two schools, but their proximity is so close that they could easily function as one PreK-12 building. The small Kansas town where this district is located relies on agriculture as it's main resource. It is also a "bedroom community" for a larger city, where many people drive to work in healthcare, retail sales, higher education, and manufacturing. Generations of families have lived and stayed in Hidden Creek, but they also have families who move in to stay with extended family or take advantage of the lower rent and real estate prices.

In an area of Kansas that is somewhat averse to change, Hidden Creek is a bit of an anomaly. The staff at Hidden Creek want their high school graduates to be academically competitive and ready for higher education and the workforce in Kansas and across the nation and know that innovation will give their students the advantage. When their district asked staff to vote regarding redesign, it was during wheat harvest (a very busy and important time in rural Kansas). Once teacher, who is a leader of the school redesign team, shared this insight. "When I was asked to vote (for or against redesign), it was right during harvest. I didn't know what 'redesign' was, so I Google searched it and came up with nothing. I voted in favor because I believe in my principal and superintendent, but I also thought that there would be enough 'no' votes that we wouldn't have to do it." That teacher became one of the most ardent supporters and leaders of their redesign plan.

As Hidden Creek progressed through their plan year, they took out-of-the-box measures to inform their public. They rented out the local movie theater and hosted informational question and answer sessions, complete with free popcorn. They blitzed their Facebook page and website with photos and information. They hosted one of the first on-site ParentCamps, which is an un-conference for parents and families, for families to ask any questions they wanted. Still, there was confusion and pushback. Some families had moved back to Hidden Creek so their children could have the same simple, quiet childhood that they had grown up with, and Redesign felt in opposition to their dreams. Others were just uncertain and suspicious of anything that "the state" was leading and felt that maybe their local control was being challenged. High school students, when asked how they would change their school if they could make it the *best* school, were at a loss as to how they would want to change it. Having never been to school anywhere else, they had no context for the kinds of innovations that could be possible through redesign.

Still, the Hidden Creek staff continued to update their school board every month to be sure that board members had the most current information and could freely ask questions. Hidden Creek maintained an open-door policy and met one-on-one with any community members who had questions. Hidden Creek staff communicated almost daily, for months, using pictures and videos of children engaged in project-based learning projects, community service projects and career exploration activities. They met with their local chamber of commerce, Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, and local ministerial alliance to share why redesigning their school was important for their students and how it would strengthen their community. It was exhausting, but they were able to persevere because their board was supportive and a small group of families was quietly

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encouraging. The turning point for Hidden Creek came in the first year of implementation, when families could see the redesign strategies in action and became advocates of their "new" school.

Reflections as the Elementary Redesign Specialist

When we created the project timeline, deliverables, and methodology of Kansans Can Redesign, we knew that Family, Business, and Community (FBC) engagement in each community was essential. Family and community engagement and communicating with stakeholders was one of the objectives stated in each stage of the project timeline. We provided examples and templates of communication plans. However, districts of all sizes seemed to struggle to maintain a communication plan that allowed for regular opportunities to receive authentic feedback from families, businesses, and other community members. We did not quite realize that in many places, to redesign schools and systems, it would require radically redesigning the structures and protocols systems used to engage with their broader community.

Another reflection is that for the first two years, we coached schools to approach FBC engagement from a family first perspective, then engage business and community. However, after reading the Fiore book, I have a different perspective. School systems exist as part of the greater community, and that community includes businesses, churches, social services, medical services, and emergency services. Families are stakeholders who are closest to the students. However, community members who no longer have children in school and who are taxpayers can have a tremendous amount of leverage and influence. Communication efforts must engage the entire ecosystem of stakeholders, and identifying, leveraging, and equipping the key communicators of the broader community to spread accurate information is also essential (Fiore, 2016).

In the scenario of the Adams School District, they started strong, engaging families in conversations about the hopes and dreams they had for their children and their schools. Families were excited and eager to provide feedback. However, the Adams District fell back into old patterns after the initial parent meeting and made decisions without those stakeholders. One thing I heard multiple times was, "Our parents trust us to do what is best for their children." However, if a school or system is redesigning, it *should* cause stakeholders to have questions and without a mechanism to keep that supportive community regularly informed and opportunities for them to have their questions heard and answered, those questions rapidly turned to doubts, suspicions, and fears. It took months for Adams Elementary School to rebuild trust with their families.

In the scenario of the Hidden Creek District, they did everything right according to traditional family communication methods, but ran into opposition when they got ahead of the community and didn't thoroughly establish early on why they needed to redesign. Hidden Creek was able to press through because of strong, positive building leaders and a culture where the trust was so strong that a teacher would vote yes because of the trust she had in her principal. But it was a struggle that took well over a year of continuous meetings, dialogue, and marketing to overcome.

Recommendations for School Leaders

Build and nurture a collaborative school culture.

> Schools that are redesigning need to take care of their internal public because that is the very core of school culture (Fiore, 2016). Poor school culture creates a negative work environment that results in high stress, and high teacher and administrator turnover (Balthazard et al., 2006; Kaplan & Owings, 2013). In a positive school culture adults in the building believe in and model the emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management) that they are trying to teach to students (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009). This application of emotional intelligence looks like adults working out their disagreements together, treating each other kindly and respectfully, fully participating in challenging discussions, and keeping the needs of students at the center of every conversation (Garmeston & Wellman, 2013). When adults exhibit these behaviors, the school culture grows and those within the school benefit.

School and district administrators are transformational and learning leaders.

> School and district administrators have the unique role of leading the day-to-day management of school while also looking out for the bigger picture. In Redesign schools, administrators need to be instructional and transformational leaders who are continually seeking out and developing the talents and leadership skills in teachers. Leadership can be described as shared or democratic leadership as well, but regardless of what it was called, it looks like a leader who loves their staff and students and is focused on removing barriers to empower personal and professional growth (Maxwell, 2008).

Schools and districts must have a coordinated communication plan.

> This plan outlines the details of how stakeholders will be engaged and how often, whose responsible it is for doing so and who will see that the communication happens. Larger districts naturally have staff dedicated to this essential plan, but that is not to say that smaller districts cannot create and implement a plan as well. In Kansas, the communication plans that seem to work the best are when schools are focused on engaging their families, and the district administration takes care of the broader community, including the elderly who are active voters and taxpayers, and business stakeholders. The key is "engagement," which implies that communication goes both ways. Not only is the school system transparent, communicating frequently, but there are ample and varied opportunities for the community to ask questions and voice their opinions. In all instances, the use of multiple means of communication, such as the newspaper, radio, flyers, face-to-face meetings, and social media should all be maximized.

Redesigning schools is a huge undertaking that must be a community project, not just a school or district project. Communities who embrace redesigning schools must also "redesign" how they interact, engage, and support the education of each student.

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