

Civic Engagement: A Drive to Foster Better Learning Opportunities towards National Development

Dr. Reckonel G. Simpson

Abstract: *The scope and focus of civic engagement is unquestionable and subsequently, should be a part of everything that we do. Importantly, it should be articulated in our mission and vision statements and should be explicitly stated so that ambiguities can be avoided. For communities to advance, and democracy to be achieved, the purpose of civic engagement should be clearly communicated. Institutions have become quite aware of the tradeoffs and benefits that can be had through established agreements with the public (Stone et. al, 2001).*

Keywords: Civic engagements, Learning opportunities, communities, collaboration

1. Introduction

We need to become cognizant of the fact that education is not an abstract process, but is dependent on all stakeholders' engagement. Therefore, as a society, we must begin to seek to create public awareness of the importance of fostering professional learning communities. As a people/nation, we must continue to build and maintain stakeholders' engagement, as we become aware of the advantages that can be achieved through established agreements with the public (Stone et. al, 2001). Lasker et al. (2003) discovers that community members are "rarely treated as peers or resources in problem solving" (p.20). Rather they are treated as outcast, mere customers, clients or entities of societal change (Lasker et al., 2003; Fulton, 2012). As a democratic nation, there needs to be greater and deeper engagement to achieve success. All key players must confront the challenges together in a unified way, and work assiduously in enhancing public engagement by their commitments and dedication.

In an effort to build professional communities, Dufour (2014) articulates that a culture of collaboration is needed.¹ Public engagement is all about collaboration. It is people connecting with each other, in which, the efforts of all, is seen as communal and the governments and the various sectors across the country working collaboratively and interdependently to achieve this mandate. As De Lancer Jules (2011) orate, citizens must not only participate, letting their voices heard but importantly, they must influence decisions, and action results (De Lancer Jules, 2011). Thus those who will be most affected should not be excluded from the decision planning process.

Puriefoy (2005) articulates that public engagement as a process is quite a flexible concept and indeed covers multifaceted activities that are chartered by citizens in an effort to effect change. At its core, it encapsulates the sharing and communicating of information, regarding school activities and programs and importantly, supports the causes

and issues regarding public education. Those of us who are advocates of civic engagement, are cognizant of the underlining benefits that can be achieved. Puriefoy (2005) alludes to the following benefits that can be derived from civic engagement:

- Enhances the quality of democratic governance;
- Legitimacy of the government is enhanced by the citizens and residents participate directly in policy and decision making processes;
- Enhances the quality of the citizens' lives by allowing them to see ... the larger collective good. Thus the mandate of any nation should be to provide an education system for its citizenry. One that requires and involves a collaborative effort by all stakeholders, one that is interconnected and meets the needs of not just some of its individuals but in effect, all (Puriefoy, 2005).

As we forge to foster professional learning communities, in the American society, let us bear in mind, that civic engagement must become our modus operandi. It should be spontaneous and seen as a collaborative effort among all key players for it to have a significant impact on the nation's human capital. When groups are properly managed, there will be better interpersonal relationships and greater efficacy. This article will specifically be focusing on how the nation can foster professional learning communities through civic engagement, which in turn will impact national development.

Public engagement is all about how we as a people connect with each other, as Franklin (2014) states it is just more than communicating and sharing together, but it is how we connect and collaborate as a village. The American school system of governance, has been faced with challenges of racism, social stratification, inequality and social and educational inequality. All these challenges coupled together have impeded the overall process of public education and by extension public engagement.

To address this issue there needs to be an established framework that clearly articulates the purpose and definition of civic engagement and in the same vein, communities and higher learning institutions must come together and begin to work collaboratively and interdependently towards problem

¹ <https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Professional-information/Leadership-capability-framework/Building-professional-community>

solving. Thus community and institutions engagement must be reciprocal

Truth is told, the influence of globalization, the inclusion and involvement of all key players in the process, changes in national school policies, political influence and diversity have all channeled the path to a better education system where public engagement has been more meaningful and impactful (Puriefoy, 2005). However, more needs to be done in order to build the professional communities that we aspire towards.

Puriefoy argues that most Americans have now seen the importance of educating their children to a high standard, and as a result of this, have come to realize that globalization and all its gadgets have put a new twist on this demand for education for all, thus making it even harder to achieve a high level of mastery, effectiveness and quality that is being demanded by the populous.

However, the challenges are many and include the lack of the public's influence and control over what can be termed as the demand for and expectation of excellence, not being able to achieve this and the accountability for the provision of this quality public education by our elected officials and through effective school governance, and adequate and stable financial resources for public schools (Puriefoy, 2005).

Puriefoy contends that this quality public education will not be become accessible or made available to all children unless, there is a shift in focus, and the American people become more vigilant, knowledgeable, and proactive and passionate about civic engagement. In order for these challenges to be alleviated there has to be a collaborative effort among all stakeholders in the process, whereby, everyone is involved in fully coordinating and aligning the various actions to create a more unified system not only that but critical to this thrust is the whole issue of mobilization and she alludes that effectiveness and positive outcomes will only be achieved when individuals are informed, involved and convinced of the value of the specified goals and are motivated and empowered to make fundamental changes in the political structure, being informed from inception, being fully cognizant of the potential benefits and also the possible risks involved based on the actions taken, only then will there be meaningful and impactful changes in the quality of education.

Stone et. al (2001) allude that reformation can only be achieved in the educational arena when all key players see the need for change. This engagement cannot be unilateral in scope, but must be endorsed by all in a unified and collaborative manner. To be truly effective, civic mobilization should be about promoting the commitment of resources and shared understanding. Stakeholders must come together for educational improvements (Stone et. al, 2001).

Thus, the goal of education should be to educate, empower, engage and uphold civic responsibility among the citizenry. Communities and institutions must now begin to be mindful of the disconnect and begin to bring heads of government,

states, policy makers and strategists, together to forge greater public engagement. Thus becoming mindful of the benefits of public engagement. To this end, I propose the implementation of the following strategies that will serve to foster and improve public engagement in the American society:

- 1) Create and coordinate opportunities for direct dialogue between parents, teachers and students in a bid to supporting neighborliness. As a strategy, this would serve to encourage public engagement, unifying the voice of the public and bringing equality in public schools (Orr & Rogers, 2011).
- 2) Public awareness that keep stakeholders informed about policy changes and school reforms and general issues facing the educational process. Some of the avenues that could be used include: circulars, notification letters, pamphlets, public campaign and social media.
- 3) Greater parental involvement where parents can share their ideas, opinions and concerns in a formal setting and work collaboratively in problem solving and decision making.
- 4) Civic engagement should involve the collective actions of all stakeholders including: parents, community members, youth and organized civic groups (Orr & Rogers, 2011). Being cognizant of this, the Parents' Teachers Association (PTA), is the ideal body that could drive this process. The PTA as a body can play a crucial role in engaging parents, school board, administrative body, staff and students in the planning, organizing, delegating and controlling of policy initiatives affecting the school community and implementing strategies to deal with same. In so doing they will become active key players in policy initiatives and decision making.
- 5) Creating public relations and community engagement among schools. For example, international day of education, culture day, creating support groups in communities to name a few will build synergy, greater involvement, interactions, and improved personal and professional development among schools at the national level.
- 6) Changes in policy directions. For example, the establishment of a new curriculum that fosters inclusivity, that can bring some level of parity to all. That is, parity in content coverage, methodologies and assessment techniques etc. This will help to alleviate some of the disparity and unevenness in the teaching and learning process.
- 7) Building and maintaining healthier school environment. Hosting seminars and workshops on conflict resolution, anger management to create greater interpersonal and collaboration skills. For example, conflict resolution management in schools should be a government initiative towards creating positive attitudes, alleviating violence and at the same time promoting conflict resolution in the American school environment.
- 8) Greater stakeholders' engagement where everybody is seen as important to the process of reformation and so all regardless of class, race, economic strata, gender, ethnicity, social class, uneducated or in the minority. Everybody collectively working together in creating a learning environment that is geared towards

empowerment, skills development and sustainability. All voices must be heard.

- 9) Development of after school programs including homework centers, peer teaching and volunteerism.
- 10) Development and implementation of innovative programs, for example, adopt a school policy, parents' day, or adopt a child, cleanup campaign, career day, boys' day, girls' day, parents' consultancy day, safer school campaign are all initiatives that can engender and foster a culture of more inclusive representation of all key players in public discourse. This will certainly lead to a greater level of responsiveness and involvement in determining education policy and practice for sustainability.

- [7] Stone, C. et al. (2001). Building civic capacity: The politics of reforming urban schools. Introduction, Ch 1, Ch 4

Importantly, too is the need for all stakeholders to buy - in to the change and at the same time harmonizing an environment of trust, that is, promulgating the importance of the change, how it will be managed, and also empowering others to act on the vision are important factors to consider. I endorse the idea of having values that will speak to equity, fairness, equality, inclusivity, professionalism, results - oriented, respect, honesty and integrity, responsiveness, customer focused, teamwork and cooperation.

In sum, civic engagement can foster better learning opportunities. When civic engagement is achieved, the quality of our public education will not only become accessible to the elites of the society, but to all through mobilization. We should endeavor to work persistently with all stakeholders to ensure that the goals are achieved. In doing this, we should seek to engender a climate of trust, equality, openness, creativity, and collaboration by working in a democratic and unified way in addressing issues/problems.

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