



School Board and  
Youth Engagement Lab  
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# DEMOCRATIZING MODERN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

## The Outreach Model of Parent and Community Engagement

### OUTREACH

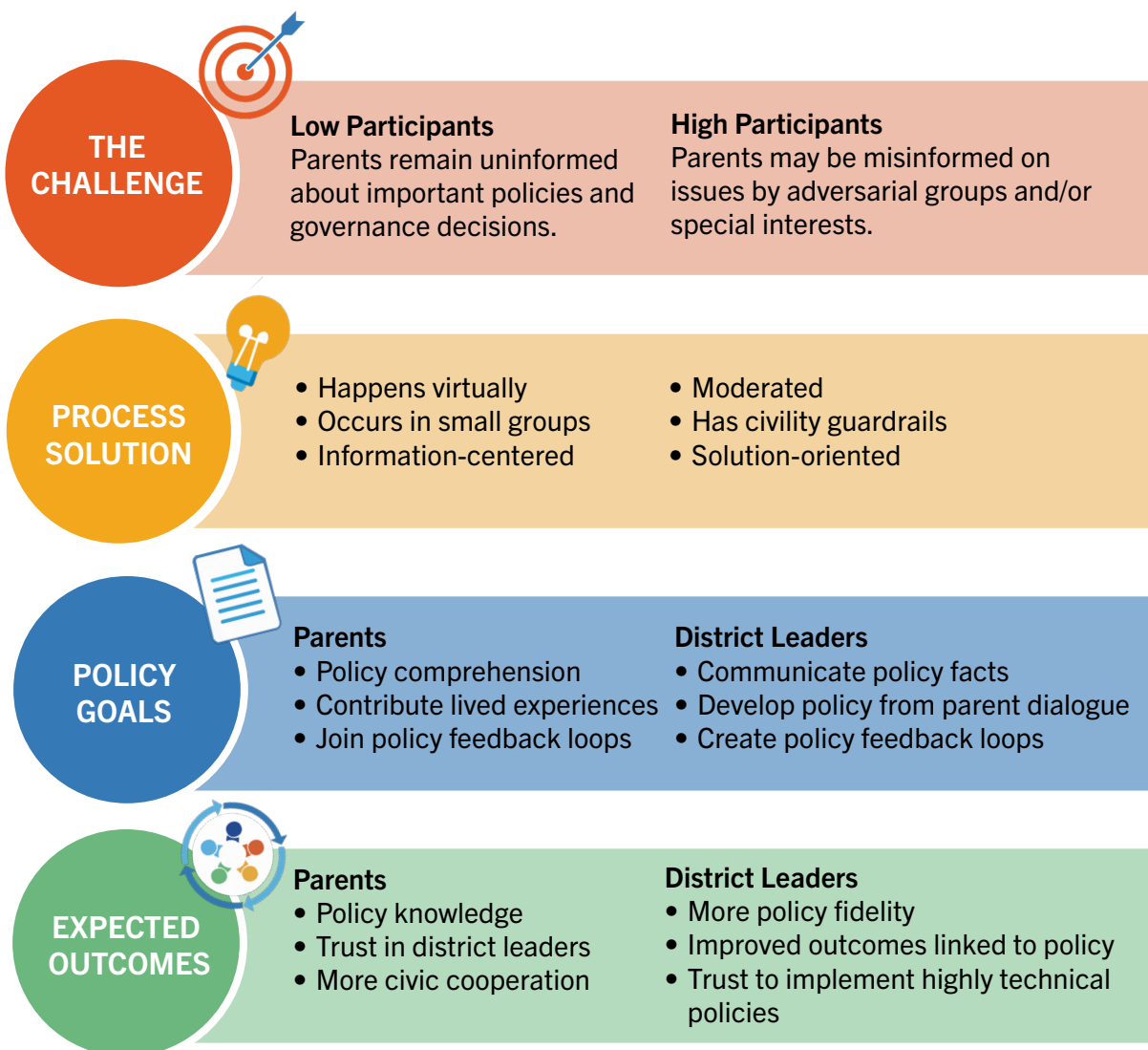
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The Outreach Framework (see Figure 1) uses research from political science on democratic governance and political communication to form an actionable model for parent and community engagement. The Outreach Framework components include:

1. The participation challenges that differ based on parents' level of engagement
2. Parent deliberations as a solution to the engagement challenges
3. Policy-related expectations post-deliberation
4. Anticipated effects on parents and schooling outcomes

**Figure 1.** The OUTREACH Framework for Democratic Community Engagement



## THE CHALLENGE

Decades of research has established that parental engagement with schools is critical to the academic success of students (Anderson and Mapp 2002; Henderson 2007; Warren et al. 2009; Mapp et al. 2022). Yet, districts routinely struggle with cultivating consistent and productive parent engagement, especially at the district-wide level. The lack of parent engagement at the district level is particularly troubling, as it is at the central level where much of the local level policy decision-making occurs. School board members largely agree that parent and community engagement shapes how well students perform in the classroom. A 2017 study of school board members initiated by the National School Board Association reveals that 95% of school board members identify community support as a vital factor for improving student achievement.

Currently, the primary opportunity for parent and community engagement is the school board meeting. Usually occurring monthly, most school boards host an open session that includes a section in the meeting for ordinary community stakeholders to address the board via public comment. Most meetings are poorly attended. Only 30% of Americans attend a school board meeting within a given year (Collins 2021). Less than 10% stand up to deliver a public comment to their board (Collins 2026). Recently, the few who do participate tend to be motivated by culture war issues that are being politicized at the national level (Houston 2024).

School boards, therefore, experience a participation problem that manifests in two ways based on the engagement level of the community members. For the silent 70% who do not attend board meetings, school boards struggle to inform them of important policy matters. For the active 30% - especially the boisterous 10%, the challenge is to prevent those community members from mobilizing around misinformation or goals that only benefit a narrow special interest group. Thus, for that high engagement group, the challenge is to ensure they are bringing points from accurate information into board meeting discussions. Creating the right information environment becomes a precondition for developing and deepening the public's trust in district leaders that is needed for them to implement major reforms.

While solving the engagement problem is critical, school boards lack the capacity to address the issue. About 60% of board members indicate that they can spend no more than 24 hours per month on board service, as most are full-time employees elsewhere. Less than half of school boards report receiving access to communications staff, despite over 90% reporting having access to administrative support. Their current structure is not conducive for generating the parent and community engagement that the evidence suggests they need.

## PROCESS SOLUTION

The Outreach Framework conceptualizes engagement as a process through which to build the right civic norms throughout a school district and/or school community. More specifically, we want a mass community that is: well-informed, participating in civil discourse, and supporting policies that advance the shared good (over narrow interests). As a process, building the right civic norms requires stepwise progression. Thus, through the framework, we should think of engagement as a staircase. The initial step is establishing trust through creating the proper information environment. The second step is to generate efficacy by creating engagement opportunities that offer material stakes. The final step is to use engagement to pursue more seismic reforms. However, we reach each step through the strategic use of democratic deliberation.

### *Climbing the Stairs to Democratic Reform*

The primary goal of this alternative model is to rejoin two concepts that have become more disparate over time: democratic decision-making and school reform. We forge these concepts together, not just through deliberation but utilizing deliberation for specific aims. I have identified three purposes: 1) creating a healthy information environment, 2) raising and addressing solvable problems and 3) initiating major reform. These goals should be thought of as separate but interdependent parts of a sequence that I call the “stairs to democratic reform.”

This digital deliberation process is operationalized differently depending on a district’s location on the sequence. Step 1 is to create healthy information environments. Here leaders initiate parent deliberations around relevant (factual) policy information. The end goal is not for the discussions to result in any action taken. Instead, the purpose is to inform parents of a policy topic and generate questions that can further clarify the district’s current policy or practice. The dual purpose is to also allow for parents to surface misinformation being accessed by external information sources and enable the discussions focused on the proper information to debunk false claims. The overarching goal is to achieve and maintain a large critical mass of well-informed community members across the district.

Step 2 is to introduce solvable problems. At this step, the deliberations become tools for parents to offer and weigh different ideas for taking a specific action. Through reasoned-based discussion, they arrive at a collective decision or a set of recommendations that can immediately be put into practice by district leaders. This type of process prompts them to view the school board’s power as more legitimate, while increasing their sensibility that ordinary community members can influence decision-making (Collins et al. 2024). In a healthy information environment, school governance at this second step leads to large-scale decision-making that solves shared problems.

The final step to reach is using democratic deliberations to achieve meaningful, substantive policy reform. This process involves taking major issues of high consequence and making changes around that issue directly through parent engagement. This involves multiple iterations of deliberations that, like a funnel, narrow the scope from ideas around broad issue areas to specific principles of a large reform. This process succeeds on the shoulders of the healthy information environment (where policy knowledge can be consumed and applied) and the civic muscle memory that gets developed through multiple rounds of collectively solving shared problems.

**Figure 2.** Stairs to Democratic Reform



### *Deliberation as an Engagement Strategy*

The goal is for school boards to institutionalize the practice of initiating democratic deliberations comprised of everyday parents and community members. The political science literature defines democratic deliberations as reason-based discussions over factual information, where the goal is to reach consensus. These discussions typically occur in small groups amongst representative “mini-publics” of 12-15 people (Collins 2025). They’re also usually moderated. In the Outreach model, the idea is to have meetings attracting critical masses of parents and community members who would be (randomly) sorted into different small groups to discuss specific policy issues. The discussions will have civility guardrails to ensure mutual respect is always in place. Most importantly, the discussions are specific and solution-oriented.

For scalability, these democratic deliberations should primarily happen virtually. This enables the discussion to occur without the need to travel to the district office for a school board meeting. The deliberations are about community members talking to one another, not the district leaders. Thus, district leaders are not required to attend, although they would (ideally) serve as moderators. They should also provide relevant policy documents prior to the meeting for the deliberation participants to access and reference.

The themes that emerge from the discussions will be documented and a synthesized summary will be made available to the district leaders. Leaders will then be encouraged to communicate findings from the discussions to the participants. The substance of those findings will differ depending on the location on the stairs. For example, any eventual policy resolution that the board reaches through pursuing Step 2 should be communicated directly to participants. The goal is to create an engagement environment that breaks from the tendency to have one-to-one direct responses between individual parents and their district leadership. Instead, we move toward allowing the ideas, questions, and concerns that emerge from communal discussion to be the focus for accountability. Imagine that, instead of relying on school board meetings filled with empty seats or public comment sessions fueled with public animosity towards leaders, parents and community members were talking to one another about ways to further improve the local schools.

The Outreach virtual platform is designed to facilitate this process effectively and efficiently. It hosts the virtual forums through which the democratic deliberations occur. It includes a moderation panel for moderators monitor and moderate discussion. The Outreach forums rely on an LLM to maintain civility guardrails that flag harmful speech. Upon completion of a forum, the tool produces AI-generated summaries of the discussions and participation analytics for district leaders to see. It also nudges leaders to communicate the report and a proposed policy resolution (when possible) directly back to the participants. With technology, this model can be brought to any community member’s cell phone.

## **POLICY GOALS**

By structuring democratic deliberations for parents and community members, the policymaking environment should look different. The opportunity to participate in information-based virtual discussions centered around meaningful and solvable issues should attract more of the silent 70% who tend not to show up at board meetings. Meanwhile, the assignment into small groups and discussion at the community member level should reduce the incentive for the loudest voices to pursue narrow adversarial politics. With discussions being centered on policy information

provided by the leadership, the participants should better comprehend the policy issues around which the board has organized virtual discussion. The policy action taken by the board should also better match the lived experiences of different families in the district, as the deliberations invite those perspectives into the dialogue. Ultimately, this process should create policy feedback loops through which more organic collaboration can form.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Through this process, school districts should see a stronger civic infrastructure developing. Parents and community members should become more knowledgeable about policy issues. Thus, they should be more likely to reject misinformation. We should see deepened trust in school district leaders from authorizing a process grounded in speaking and listening. This trust should sow the seed for more civic cooperation - school volunteerism, committee involvement, fundraising etc. We should see higher overall levels of participation without a rise in adversarial politics.

For district leaders, this process should, then, provide legitimacy around their policy efforts. By funneling ideas through the Outreach Framework process there should be more public fidelity to the leaderships' policy decision and accompanying strategies and initiatives. With greater fidelity, we should see improvements on outcomes related directly to the policy issue. We should also see that greater levels of public trust enable district leaders to make and implement more technical policy decisions without unnecessary scrutiny. The goal of the framework is to allow for input on malleable policy issues to cultivate the trust needed to pursue major reforms that require, not public involvement but the judgement of expert practitioners.

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