



# Organizational Training and Relationship Building for Increasing Public Participation in a Public School District

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*From the early twentieth century to the present, citizen participation in U.S. public institutions—particularly schools—has continually decreased. The trend has been linked to the bureaucratization of public schools and their increasing reliance on expert knowledge for solutions to school- and education-related problems. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of a parent training program designed to increase a school district's capacity for public participation by parents and other citizens.*

*The program—known as Leadership St. Vrain—provided citizens knowledge about school district operations and management (know-how) and relationship-building opportunities with key decision makers (know-who). This article focuses on the experiences and participation of the citizens from a mixed-methods study that collected data using two original survey instruments, follow-up interviews, and archival documents. Of the five domains studied, this paper focuses on findings for the domains of knowledge, relationships, and action, as well as the secondary ripple effect from participants to others who did not participate in the training.*

**Keywords:** *parent engagement, public education administration, public participation, public deliberation, social capital*

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue of the Administrative Issues Journal, Dr. Michael Williams encouraged readers to be ready to “seize the day” when presented with unexpected opportunities and the accompanying “contexts-of-change” (2012). “Contexts-of-change are potentials,” wrote Williams, “unique alignments between an opportunity and our knowledge and skills that, if properly used, can enable us to benefit from engaging the opportunity” (p. 3). Williams serves as the Dean of the MBA Program at Thomas Edison State College (New Jersey) and may have been directing his comments to aspiring entrepreneurs and business leaders, but the advice is equally valid for education. In particular, we think it valid for the legions of America’s public school administrators now managing a crucible of financial, political, and social problems impacting public schools. A growing number of these leaders are “seizing the day” by proactively informing and engaging parents and other stakeholders in increasingly complex problem solving and decision making processes. The purpose of this paper is to describe and share how one Colorado school district responded to its context-of-change by implementing a robust parent-training program designed to increase the district’s capacity for more effective engagement and participation of the public in problem solving and decision making.

## RISE OF THE EXPERT

Public participation is defined “as any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to make decisions” (International Association of Public Participation, 2006, p. 2). Central to public

participation is the idea that individuals or groups affected by a particular decision should be given an opportunity to be engaged in making that decision. However, when institutional leaders bypass the difficult work of inclusionary decision making, the outcomes can include inadequate or misinformed decisions, diminished stakeholder trust and buy-in, increased disengagement from public affairs, rejection of institutional policies and decisions, and refusal to provide advocacy, monetary support and volunteer time.

Fischer (2009) attributed the diminishing connection to the natural tendency that, as organizations grow in size and complexity, they become more centralized and hierarchical. He stated that public institutions were lacking “well-developed political arrangements that provide citizens with multiple and varied participatory opportunities to deliberate basic political issues” (p. 61). Accordingly, administrators of public institutions are evaluating their decision making processes and exploring strategies to authentically and systematically engage stakeholders to better understand shared problems and the collective well-being (Mathews, 2006). Fostering engagement requires working through the complexities posed by individual interests, perceptions, and positions to find workable solutions that garner stakeholder support (Yankelovich & Friedman, 2010).

Public disengagement in public schools became increasingly evident throughout U.S. society in the early 20th century. By 1927, John Dewey, the influential Progressive Era social scientist, predicted that citizens would struggle to fulfill their democratic duties given the increasingly technical nature of our culture (Fischer, 2009). “The prime difficulty, we have seen, is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests” (Dewey, 1927, p. 146).

As the role of technical expertise grew among some professional educators, they believed it was their job to coax citizens to accept a new way of thinking, while others quietly cut citizens out of decision making processes (Mathews, 2006). In education and other public institutions, a growing class of public policy specialists took charge and did their work without accountability to the public (Dahl, 1989). The transition from citizen-driven to technically-based and expert-driven institutions pushed citizens to the periphery. In the words of one commentator of the time, Americans were “living in a time of big decisions, they know they are not making any” (Mills, 1959, p. 5).

For decades since, school district officials have grown increasingly isolated from the public and have made far-reaching decisions with minimal input or collaboration. This growing autonomy among educators has had long-term consequences in reshaping the public’s attitude toward a public institution that was once revered. Citizen distrust in public institutions increased in the 1960s and 1970s (Mathews, 2006). Despite some efforts of school officials to build more inclusive organizational cultures, the relationship between citizens and school administrators was further strained (Gillon, 2000). Some characterize the growth of the charter school movement as an expression of rejection of mainstream public school administrators who are perceived as having grown insular and unresponsive to the needs and concerns of parents. In *Making Good Citizens*, Diane Ravitch and Joseph Viteritti (2001) acknowledged the deteriorating relationship between parents and school leaders documented by researchers in the 1980s and pointed to a breakdown in the purpose of public schools:

Such critics as Theodore Sizer and Deborah Meier noted a fundamental absence of animating purpose in the comprehensive public school that attempted to be all things to all students. Others complained of bureaucratic inertia, of institutions overwhelmed by an abundance of disconnected programs targeting discreet groups of students. (p. 6)

Developments in the larger society also impacted the ability of public school administrators to deepen their relationship with stakeholders. State and federal court decisions imposed laws and injunctions that, while well-intended, frequently left citizens with unresolved feelings, resentments, and frustrations, particularly when given no opportunity to offer input on the decisions handed down. For example, the historic ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) made it unconstitutional for individual citizens and community groups to be involved in determining local policies about issues such as school segregation (Bauman, 1996). After 1960, many citizens perceived government involvement in general as excessive (Gillon, 2000). Evans (1995) argued that government officials had assumed a caretaker role of public schools. As public school policies came under increasing control due to court decisions and government regulations, citizens’ ability to impact local schools declined, and growing numbers of citizens withdrew their involvement.



School administrators, who now had little motivation to seek citizen engagement in policy decisions, were empowered by the strengthening role of government and the decreasing ability of citizens to influence local school policies. Researchers found that school administrators resisted citizen engagement when citizen opinions contradicted school law or their own inclination to protect the status quo. Administrator resistance to public participation further alienated citizens and confirmed their perceptions that their public schools did not, in fact, belong to them (Mathews, 2006). After decades of increasing regulations, state administrators assumed a custodial role in public schools (Evans, 1995). Over the years, many school officials professed their support for citizen participation but, in reality, had no interest in allowing citizens to upset their policies and plans (Sexton, 2004). Mathews (2006) described school trustees as hemmed in by regulation, stymied by litigation and frustrated: "They struggle to cope with externally imposed restrictions, which many believe undermine their ability to act in the best interest of their schools" (p. xv). Since the 1950s, the vibrant tradition of citizen engagement in local school affairs steadily receded and professional school administrators and other trained experts increasingly became the dominant force in institutional problem solving and decision making.

## LOSS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Insulating schools from citizen involvement strained the formerly close bonds that existed between the citizens and their schools. Fewer parents attended school-related functions, joined committees, or sought leadership roles on the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and school board (Putnam, 2000). The experiences and perspectives parents had previously provided to complement the findings and recommendations of professional educators were significantly lessened. The lack of citizen involvement also resulted in greater distrust and less buy-in for the decisions made. According to McNeil (2002), "There has perhaps been no time in our history when links between public education and democracy have been as tenuous as they are right now" (p. 234). Some have argued that this distancing between institution and citizens has resulted in school districts losing valuable input, public support, and commitment for new policies and change initiatives.

Disengagement between educators and citizens also impeded the development of functional relationships and productive dialogue. In the absence of collaborative problem solving, policymaking, and shared governance, administrators grow comfortable conducting business and implementing policies without working through complex or controversial problems with parents and other stakeholders. As citizens attend fewer school meetings, are excluded from tedious discussions about education policy, and are increasingly unwilling to assume the responsibilities of a PTO officer or school board member, school leaders operate in isolation and risk estrangement and even confrontation from their base. Instead of working for important systemic change that most individuals and groups support, they focus their efforts on garnering partisan support (Farkas & Johnson, 1993). The confrontational nature of communication in that atmosphere leads to even higher levels of distrust. Without a well-planned, well-facilitated, and deliberative process, participants can become enmeshed in "a web of suspicion, extreme partisanship, competitiveness, and poor communications," (Mathews, 2006, p. 35). When educators and citizens become alienated, their willingness to engage in productive dialogue about shared concerns is weakened and the school district administrators' capacity for meaningful public participation is greatly diminished.

Putnam (2000) referred to the ability and willingness for people to engage in productive dialogue as social capital, a term he defined as "the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from the connections among people and their social networks" (p. 19). When school leaders engage with citizens in meaningful dialogues about shared problems, the capacity of community members to address and solve problems is enhanced. This broadens citizen participation, deepens understanding of differing viewpoints, strengthens personal relationships, builds trust, and achieves better outcomes. An inclusive and well-facilitated process that nurtures engagement serves to strengthen social capital and favorably impacts the quality of education (Putnam, 2001). While many educators and other key decision makers in the community believe the stereotype that non-expert citizens cannot be relied upon to make valuable contributions to complex problems, extensive research has shown that when provided with information and other tools, citizens successfully and meaningfully address complex issues (Yankelovich & Friedman, 2010).

Unfortunately, without high levels of social capital in a robust culture of stakeholder engagement, disengaged citizens are likely to become adversarial. According to Coleman and Gotze (2001), "The alternative to engaging the pub-

lic will not be an unengaged public, but a public with its own agenda and an understandable hostility to decision making processes that ignore them” (p. 12). Further, the likelihood for confrontation is exacerbated when the public is not represented or when individuals or groups hold highly polarized positions (Putnam, 2000). Without deliberative processes that proactively engage the public, school administrators unwittingly over empower indi-

viduals and groups with extreme interests that are disconnected from the common good of the community. Skocpol (1999) stated that American values are pushed aside by such interest groups, compromising the obligations of citizenship and the democratic process.

## THE CASE FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS

In the twenty-first century, leaders of U.S. public institutions—town councils, police departments, school districts—are expected to manage conflicts that emerge from competing interests and values of citizens. Seemingly mundane issues such as school menus, bus schedules, school boundaries, and curriculum choices routinely evoke intense controversy between citizens and school staff members or central office administrators. When leaders facilitate opportunities for citizens to deliberate on shared school-related problems, citizens develop a greater understanding of the complexity of issues involved and strengthen their skills of deliberation and judgment (Yankelovich & Friedman, 2010). Unfortunately, officials frequently go the opposite direction when, empowered with expert knowledge, they develop solutions and then implement a “decide, announce, and defend” strategy (Yosie & Herbst, 1998, p. 24) to achieve a preferred and predetermined outcome. Even when such an initiative is successfully implemented, increased public distrust resulting from an exclusive process can take years to reconcile.

Alternatively, increased citizen participation in schools has numerous benefits. Deliberative decision making has been linked to better solutions to shared problems (Fung, 2004) and higher levels of stakeholder agreement and trust (Langsdorf, 2003). Public participation increases citizen interest, in part, because it signals the willingness of public officials to listen and engage in a deliberative dialogue. When the intention is to understand one another and work through a problem to arrive at the best possible solution, everyone benefits. Facilitating such processes requires the acquisition of new skills, school officials have much to gain by investing time and resources in building their capacity to lead in this way, convening the public and incorporating participatory values into their organizational culture. Public participation is particularly important at a time when shared problems are becoming more complex and there is growing urgency that public officials strengthen their capacity to effectively convene and facilitate stakeholders.

Increasingly, our society is faced with problems without clear and singular solutions. Rittel and Webber (1973) described such problems as “wicked” in nature, and contrasted them with “tame” problems, which have a solution and can be solved. Unlike tame problems, however, wicked problems—the negative impact of child poverty on success in school, for example—have no solution. According to Rittel and Webber, today’s wicked problems include “nearly all public policy issues—whether the question concerns the location of a freeway, the adjustment of a tax rate, the modification of school curricula, or the confrontation of crime” (p. 160). Wicked problems can only be managed and addressed by those people affected by the problem both now and in the future. All benefit from the interaction when the intention is to understand one another and work through the problem to arrive at the best possible resolution.

Carcasson (2009) advised leaders to work with facilitators who are trained and skilled in a variety of deliberative techniques that allow public officials and citizens to consider relevant facts from multiple viewpoints, listen to one another, openly evaluate various options, consider the underlying tensions and difficult choices inherent in most public issues, and arrive at a conclusion for action based on reasoned public judgment. To better understand the capacity of citizens to address the complex problems encountered in our communities, Yankelovich and Friedman (2010) called for community-based action research that engages citizens in issues relevant to their world, provides information and tools on complex issues, and studies how citizens develop views and relationships. This study is one such effort.

## LEADERSHIP ST. VRAIN

The study was based on a training program designed to increase the capacity of a public school district for public participation and stakeholder engagement. In the program, invitations were broadly disseminated, inviting citizens to a series of meetings to gain information about school district operations and management (referred to as *know-*





how) and relationship-building opportunities with key decision makers associated with the school district (referred to as *know-who*). The purpose of the study was to determine if the training increased participant knowledge, relationship, and action (among other domains) with or about school district and education-related issues, and whether the training had a secondary ripple effect reaching other individuals and groups in the school district and community.

The training, called Leadership St. Vrain (LSV), took place in the St. Vrain Valley School District (SVVSD), located in northern Colorado. SVVSD includes 53 schools with a growing enrollment nearing 30,000 students. The purpose of the program was to raise the school district's capacity for public participation through knowledge sharing and relationship building with citizens. Participants, mostly parents, attended 10 meetings over eight months during the course of the school year, with each meeting approximately 2.5 hours in length. The know-how components of LSV were based on presentations about all aspects of district operations, including school finance, state education funding, state and federal school laws and policies, state and district-level governance, school board policies, regulatory requirements, curriculum, and information about school operations and management. Each meeting included a know-who portion with opportunities for relationship building with SVVSD administrators and board members, as well as state elected and appointed officials, who were invited speakers.

The study's research questions included:

1. What knowledge did participants gain from the LSV training?
2. Did the training lead to enhanced relationships between the participants and key decision makers?
3. What new education-related actions did participants perform after their involvement in the LSV training?
4. Has the LSV training had a secondary or "ripple" effect reaching other citizens, schools, or the greater community?

## METHODOLOGY

The mixed-methods study contained three phases of data collection. Phase 1 was comprised of quantitative surveys of two citizen populations from the LSV and PTO groups. The LSV group was the 45 individuals who participated in one of two training cohorts, all of whom were parents of students. The PTO group was the approximately 40 PTO presidents from district schools who served their term during the period of the LSV trainings. The LSV instrument was designed as a single-point-in-time report to obtain descriptive and predictive data pertaining to the domains of knowledge (know-how), relationships (know-who), and action. In total, the LSV instrument included 50 items including thirty 5-point Likert items with a response scale *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5), ten Yes/No items, and three multiple-choice items pertaining to the knowledge, relationship, and action domains.

To the Knowledge Domain, respondents indicate their level of agreement as to whether LSV has significantly improved their knowledge in the areas of 1) school district's organizational structure; 2) instructional programs; 3) overall policies and practices; 4) the school board's role in the district; and 5) the state of Colorado's role in school funding.

To the Relationship Domain, respondents indicate their level of agreement as to whether because of relationship-building opportunities made available to them in LSV that they are 1) more likely to contact a friend or acquaintance about an education-related issue; 2) that friends and acquaintances are more likely to contact them about an education-related issue; 3) more likely to contact the superintendent about an education-related issue; 4) more likely to contact a board member about an education-related issue; and 5) more likely to contact a state legislator about an education-related issue.

With regard to the Action Domain, respondents indicated yes or no as to whether after participating in LSV they have 1) shared knowledge about school district-related information with their PTO; 2) written about a school district-related issue on a blog, Facebook, Twitter, or other social media site; 3) submitted a letter to the editor of a local newspaper concerning a school district-related issue; 4) gotten involved in an education-related state legislative initiative; 5) communicated with the superintendent or member of the board of education about an education-related issue; 6) volunteered time at a school district event; 7) made a financial contribution to a school or district-related initiative; 8) asked another parent or community member to participate in a school or district-related initiative; 9) asked another parent or community member to make a financial contribution to a school or district-related initiative; and 10) sup-

ported the campaign of a candidate based in part on education-related issues.

The PTO instrument contained 10 items (yes/no/unsure) and was designed to determine the respondents' level of awareness about the LSV training to gauge the ripple effect of education-related information and relationships reaching, informing, or otherwise affecting PTOs. The ten items are 1) I am aware of the school district's training program for parents called Leadership St. Vrain; 2) I know a parent (other than myself) who has been involved in the Leadership St. Vrain Training; 3) When I was PTO president, at least one other PTO parent had been involved in Leadership St. Vrain; 4) Members of our school PTO routinely discussed information from Leadership St. Vrain at our PTO meetings; 5) At least one member of our PTO shared information at a PTO meeting that was attributed to Leadership St. Vrain; 6) I am aware that members of Leadership St. Vrain frequently met with the superintendent of schools; 7) I am aware that members of Leadership St. Vrain frequently met with school board members or other elected officials; 8) I think members of Leadership St. Vrain obtained valuable information about school district affairs in their trainings; 9) Leadership St. Vrain favorably impacted our school's PTO during my time as PTO president; and 10) I would recommend Leadership St. Vrain to other PTO members and parents.

Phase 2 of the study collected data from face-to-face interviews of LSV participants and PTO members. Using cognitive interview techniques, the researcher used probes and follow-up questions to enable the interviewees to elaborate on experiences, concepts, and reflections that arose spontaneously. The interviews were included to obtain detailed qualitative data to further understand the effect of the training on the LSV participants and whether PTO members who by and large had not participated in the LSV training were aware of the training and its information.

Phase 3 was a review of archival materials documenting the presence and/or influence of activities related to LSV in the greater community. The materials included local and state newspapers, school and PTO newsletters, Internet searches for posts and publications that mention LSV and social media forums. Documents were gathered from a variety of sources and were categorized by several levels: PTO, school district, legislature, community, and a newly formed parent advocacy group known as Grassroots St. Vrain (GSV). Some of the archival documents were reviewed for references to or mentions of LSV.

## FINDINGS

### Knowledge the LSV Participants Gained from the Training

One of the primary objectives of the LSV training was to provide detailed information of knowledge (know-how) about the school district's operations. This included knowledge pertaining to organizational structure, instructional programs, policies and practices, governance, and school finance. During each LSV training meeting, a different area of know-how was introduced to the participants, with an extensive presentation by a subject matter expert (usually a department director or state official). Always included in the agenda was the opportunity for participants to ask questions and engage in a discussion on the topic.

For the knowledge domain, LSV participants ( $n = 27$ , 64%) were asked to evaluate whether their knowledge of each of five specific areas of the school district improved as a result of the LSV training. The statement "LSV has significantly improved my knowledge of the school district's overall policies and practices," with 97 % responding either strongly agree or agree ( $M = 1.63$ ) had the highest level of agreement. The lowest level of agreement was "LSV has significantly improved my knowledge of the school board's role in the school district," for which approximately 80% of the respondents marked either strongly agree or agree ( $M = 1.77$ ). There were no disagree or strongly disagree responses to any of the knowledge domain items.

When asked to talk about areas of knowledge, which the interviewees ( $n = 10$ ) recalled learning in the LSV training, school finance was mentioned repeatedly. In particular, participants referred to presentations by guest speaker Natalie Mullis, Chief Economist for the State of Colorado. One parent referred to the meeting as a "highlight" of the training experience. She said, "I learned so much about the district and educational funding in general at the state level from that meeting." Another parent stated

That was a really important meeting to me, because it put perspective on what the district can do and what the state is doing for the district. And how the district can do the best job in the world but can still be at the mercy



of what the state gives us.

Echoing this sentiment, another parent stated, “The financial piece was very interesting, as well as frustrating...it seems like we’re always beating our head against the wall in the State of Colorado to support our schools.”

When asked about any valuable knowledge gained in the training, one parent disclosed that she had taken away basic information that “educated people should know.” With regard to presentations by different school district administrative staff, the same parent stated,

I like how they had different departments come in and explain what their roles were in the school district. Some of us have mainstream kids who don’t need special education or don’t need resource officers and those types of things, so that was an interesting piece of knowledge.

This parent further disclosed that these explanations helped dispel the myth that some kids were getting preferential treatment. “It was an eye-opener for me to understand that’s why we have to do these five things for this one child or these sets of children that are in a very small set.”

Another knowledge area mentioned by interviewees was a greater understanding of district-wide operations. One parent expressed gratitude for the opportunity to “not just learn about my school, but the district as a whole.” Another parent commented,

I wanted to look at things more at the state level and a broader level, not just how education was impacted in my kids’ immediate schools. But how it impacted kids on a broader level, Boulder County and our state.

When discussing the various types of knowledge exposed to in the LSV training, two parents, who, apart from participation with LSV, were highly involved at the school level each mentioned other insights. One described a change in the behavior of her school’s principal, which she attributed to parents having access to information and administrators from “downtown.”

Everything was downtown. It was the fault of downtown no matter what went on in that school. “The folks downtown are telling us we’ve got to do that.” It was pretty bad. The big black hole in the middle of town that was mandating all this terrible stuff in the schools. The principals would wash their hands of it. “Downtown told us to do that.” They weren’t really part of the structure or part of the team or part of the solution. But that’s changed, hugely.

Another parent described an improved sense of insight into what decisions could actually be made by the principal at the school level that determined important issues such as class size. Prior to the LSV training, the principal could attribute unpopular decisions to the central office. This parent obtained knowledge at LSV that increased principal accountability. She said

The understanding of the FTE (full-time equivalent). How many kids can be in a classroom? That it’s sometimes mostly the building, the principal’s judgment, on how many kids can go in a classroom based on if he has open enrollment. It’s up to his discretion if he should have a mixed fourth and fifth grade.

## Enhanced Relationships between the LSV Participants and Key Decision Makers

Another primary objective of the LSV training was to provide opportunities to develop relationships with individuals who had influence in leadership and decision-making at the school district level or regarding education-related issues. I referred to these key relationships as “know-who,” and included the superintendent of schools, the president of the board of education, and other board members, school district department directors, state officials, and other elected and appointed officials who impacted education policy. Each LSV training session provided participants the opportunity to meet these key education leaders. The guest speakers—whether a department director or the president of the Colorado Senate—were asked to provide participants with their contact information for follow-up.

In the relationship domain ( $n = 27$ ), respondents ( $n = 27$ ): In the relationship domain, respondents were asked to evaluate their likelihood to engage with each of five types of stakeholders including education officials as a result of relationship building opportunities provided through the LSV training. The highest level of agreement was for “Because of relationship building opportunities made available to me in LSV, I am more likely to contact a friend or

acquaintance about an education-related issue," to which 82% marked strongly agree or agree ( $M = 1.81$ ). The lowest level of agreement was for "Because of relationship building opportunities made available to me in LSV, I am more likely to contact a state legislator about an education-related issue," to which 67% marked strongly agree or agree ( $M = 2.30$ ).

When interviewees were asked whether they had been given the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with school staff, elected officials, and other parents, as a result of LSV, all responded in the affirmative. Many referred to specific individuals with whom they had follow-up contact. When asked about valuable relationships developed in the training presentations, one parent said, "They all seemed to be department heads or in charge of something... I know Randy's name because I call their department [transportation] on a regular basis." Regarding the value of these relationships, she added, "You could put a face to a name. Oh, if I need information I can go talk to that person." Another parent said,

The structure was very good, too. Because each time you would bring in a different director or different leader of a different department of the district. Some were better than others or I just had more of an interest in. But it was the first time I was exposed to the legislators, like [State Representative] Jack Pommer. I think he was a congressman at the time... [Senator] Eve Hudak was another one who came I and talked about the Colorado growth model three years ago when it was just being developed and how it was going to change the CSAP tests.

Superintendent Don Haddad routinely attended the LSV meetings, a fact that participants repeatedly mentioned in the interviews. "I loved having Don come and update us at each meeting to let us know what he was working on," said one parent. To further elaborate a parent stated,

Oh, I think it helps tremendously on the level of trust. We live in an environment of distrust now against government, public services in general. When the school district opens their doors and invites people in and takes time out of their day to bring in the directors, executives, and Don, to shoot straight and tell us what's going on.

Another parent said,

I think the fact that there was always a representative... the superintendent or one of the administrators to come to our meetings, and that they felt we were important enough to listen and to tell us information. I think that started a level of trust.

In response to the survey item "Because of relationship-building opportunities made available to me in LSV I am more likely to contact the superintendent about an education-related issue," 77% of the respondents ( $M = 1.92$ ) marked strongly agree or agree. Interviewees also made reference to their access to school board president, John Creighton.

Understanding the school board. In particular, the board president, John Creighton, came in, and I was really impressed with him. Understanding how the board worked and what role the board played.

Later in the interview, this same parent said,

I mean, I got to talk to people and ask questions. I can't think of an event where people ducked my questions in any way, even the difficult questions. I started to understand the motivations and why people did what they did. Through that personal contact I trust those folks now... [I] talk to the school board. I disagree with [and ask] "What are you doing about this?" I do that now. Absolutely.

In survey responses to "Because of relationship-building opportunities made available to me in LSV I am more likely to contact a board member about an education-related issue," 81% of the respondents ( $M = 1.96$ ) marked strongly agree or agree.

## New Education-related Actions Participants Performed after Their Involvement in the LSV Training

The ten yes/no/unsure items included in the action domain were intended to investigate respondents' involvement in a variety of education-related activities after their LSV training. The two items in this domain resulting in the highest number of yes responses were "After getting involved in LSV I have volunteered my time at a school or district event," to which 100% marked yes and to "I have asked another parent or community member to participate in a





school or district-related initiative,” with 92% yes. The two items that received the highest number of no responses were: “I have submitted a letter to the editor of a local newspaper concerning a school district-related issue,” with 27% no, and “I have asked another parent or community member to make a financial contribution to a school or district-related initiative,” with 42% no.

Several interviewees ( $n = 10$ ) mentioned sharing information learned in LSV with friends and PTO members at their children’s schools. Two parents disclosed that specific information from LSV was included in school newsletters. Another parent talked about informal conversations with parents at school, with colleagues at work, and with members of the school board. During this interview, this parent described himself as “pretty conservative” and shared some challenges having discussions.

I find myself not as involved with the actual teachers as much because I don’t share. I’m politically pretty conservative and they’re pretty liberal and we have a fairly difficult time communicating across that gap with many of the teachers. I certainly respect them. I try to understand their point of view a lot more now.

This parent also mentioned that the nature of his participation in conversations about education had changed. Before participating in LSV, the respondent said, “I would have had some of those conversations, but they would have been more of chiming in or agreeing or disagreeing at a lunchtime conversation, rather than an informative conversation.” Another interviewee echoed this experience, saying that prior to LSV her conversations would have been different.

I don’t think I would have been confident enough to talk about those things with as many people as I did, just because when you feel informed, you feel very empowered, much more powerful.

## LSV Training’s Secondary or “Ripple” Effect Impacting Other Citizens, Schools, or the Greater Community

The PTO presidents’ ( $n = 20$ ) instrument was designed to determine the respondents’ level of awareness about the LSV training and to gauge the secondary effect of education-related information (know-how) and relationships (know-who) resulting from LSV reaching, informing, or otherwise affecting PTOs. The items that received the highest percentages of yes responses were “I am aware of the school district’s training program for parents called Leadership St. Vrain,” with 65% yes, and “At least one member of our PTO shared information at a PTO meeting that was attributed to Leadership St. Vrain,” with 63% yes. The items with the highest percentage of no responses were “Members of our school PTO routinely discussed information from Leadership St. Vrain at our PTO meetings,” with 60% no, and “I am aware that members of Leadership St. Vrain frequently met with the superintendent of schools,” with 45% no. While responses from the PTO presidents reflected a significant level of uncertainty about Leadership St. Vrain, 65% indicated that they were aware of the LSV training, 63% of respondents recalled at least one occasion when one member of their PTO shared information attributed to LSV at a PTO meeting, and 55% of respondents said yes when asked if they would recommend the LSV training to others.

In addition to conducting interviews with former LSV participants, five former PTO presidents were interviewed in 2012 to learn about possible ripple effects of the LSV trainings to the school level. Each interview took place at the school district’s administrative offices and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Each of the interviewees had been president of their elementary school PTO when one of two cohorts was participating in LSV. Of the five interviews, one president had little awareness of the LSV training, one president had some information about LSV due to a PTO member’s participation, and three presidents were highly informed about LSV and actively facilitated the transfer of information between the groups.

Comments from PTO presidents suggested LSV participants who were either asked by the PTO or volunteered to serve as liaisons for PTO groups were routinely part of their PTO meeting agendas and shared know how and know who information obtained from the trainings. In PTOs in which the president had a higher level of knowledge about LSV, there was a more robust level of communication by LSV members and their reports were a fixed item on the PTO meeting agenda. In some cases, LSV information was made available to the entire community of parents via school newsletters. These PTO presidents also served as conduits of information to other parents, particularly by answering their questions or directing the parents to a reliable source of information and leveraged their relationships with district-level contacts arranging for more district administrators to attend school PTO meetings, make presentations,

and answer PTO member questions.

The interviews with PTO presidents provided evidence of a ripple effect of information moving from participants in the LSV trainings back to the PTO organizations and school communities. This qualitative evidence was supported by the quantitative data from the PTO presidents' survey instrument, which reflected an increase in awareness of LSV by PTO members. The PTO president who included an LSV report as a fixed agenda item in every PTO meeting stated, "It flowed nicely into our agenda and our committee reports. Of course, one minute it's sock hop, the next minute it's fundraiser, the next minute it's LSV." In this case, the LSV representative also took questions and concerns from the school PTO members back to the LSV meetings.

I think it was such a benefit that we had to have—like I said—this window of what was going on in the district and the venue to go back and forth...If we brought up issues in the meeting, we knew it would be carried back to the district [at next LSV meeting]—it was bureaucratic but nonetheless it was going somewhere.

As further evidence of a ripple effect of the LSV training beyond the experience of the individual participants, a variety of archival data documenting the presence and/or influence of activities related to LSV in the greater community was compiled. Documents were gathered from a variety of sources including PTO newsletters, school board minutes and video recordings, newspaper articles and video content and Internet postings. Collectively, the archival documents provided evidence of a growing ripple effect from LSV to the larger community. In addition, formal presentations about the LSV training were provided at the request of the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB), the Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE), the Colorado School Public Relations Association (COSPR), and the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for the benefit of their respective conference attendees.

## IMPLICATIONS

As evidenced by the repeated references made by LSV participants, a key element to the overall impact of the LSV training was the executive leadership of the district—the superintendent, his leadership team, and the board president—and their consistent availability, credibility, and support. While the data indicated that the training curriculum and experience motivated the participants' subsequent increase in engagement, among other findings. Among members of the district leadership team, the superintendent maintained expectations concerning deliberative problem solving and recognized the efforts of staff to proactively ensure citizens were involved in district deliberations. To effectively advance the cause of public participation, we cannot expect the public to be the prime mover and sustainer of an institution's participatory culture. Fischer (2009) stated, "There are relatively few instances in which citizens have proceeded successfully without some sort of assistance and support from experts who emerged to help them along the way" (p. 110). Thus, trusted advocates within the district—leaders to whom citizens can turn for accurate information, reciprocity, and rapport—are the ingredient that provides a viable environment for meaningful public participation. Without that, trainings such as LSV would likely not provide measurable and observable value, and parent engagement in school and education-related activity would surely continue to trend downward.

The tendency for today's media leaders to limit access to a broad range of perspectives and information makes the role of participatory practitioners even more critical. Fishkin (2009) agreed with this perspective and argues that instead of becoming broadly informed about an issue and exposed to how others think, citizens were more likely to be exposed to people who shared their opinions and were, therefore, more likely to be manipulated. Today's local, state, and national media culture, much of which has supplanted traditional journalism standards with *gotcha* reporting (i.e., reporting designed to inflame partisanship and controversy) and infotainment, intensifies the need for leaders who proactively inform and engage citizens. While it may be counterintuitive that we have *less* information about the interests and beliefs of our fellow citizens, or that the media supplants the role of citizens, this is what is occurring in communities across the country. The expansion of online communications, social media tools, and other technology advances may be exacerbating divisions among citizens with opposing political identifications (Bishop, 2005).

As citizens become more insular in their beliefs, the need for leaders who believe in and act upon participatory decision-making and the need for citizens who are willing to gain knowledge and hone their skills as participants will increase. Because public school communities are particularly vulnerable to divisive disputes, school leaders and citizens need skills to effectively navigate conflicting values and competing priorities.



The goal of the program should be to systematically raise the capacity of citizens to effectively participate in school district problem solving and decision-making processes by providing the spectrum of knowledge and relationships they need to be successful. School leaders should be cautious not to seek to implement a program such as LSV as a means to achieving a particular political victory such as passing a local tax initiative. School officials might expect that their work with parents and citizens in general would be lessened as a result of implementing such a program. On the contrary, it would likely increase citizen participation and the need for greater access, attention, and deliberative activities by district staff.

## SUMMARY

In response to declining citizen engagement and trust in public schools, education leaders must reevaluate their district's internal and external (outreach) problem solving and decision making processes and redouble their efforts to raise their district's capacity for effective public participation. When effectively engaged, parents and other community stakeholders will provide a wealth of valuable insight into both routine and complex issues as well as wicked problems. Additionally, by actively providing parents and others with opportunities to acquire the know-how and know-who about their schools, education leaders will increase the social capital of stakeholders to effectively participate in school and district-related activities and reverse the decline of public trust for their institution.

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