

Community involvement

in rearranging school boundaries

While fiscal savings can be achieved through closure of school sites, it is often controversial. The process becomes less contentious when community members are involved in planning.

As districts continue to face severe reductions in school funding, all potential avenues are being considered to address the current fiscal crisis. One difficult area of savings involves the closure of a school site. While the savings in implementing closures are attractive, the controversy and public pressure make this decision extremely difficult. However, due to the extreme pressure of budget reductions in place, many districts are facing this issue.

If a district does decide to move forward in this area, it is critical to incorporate a strategy that involves key stakeholders in revising the school boundaries. A well thought-out plan can provide the support from the community that is crucial in implementing the decision. Including key stakeholders offers a tremendous benefit in communicating the plan to the community and helps to prevent raucous contention that can severely disrupt the implementation.

To begin, once a district board approves

the closure of a school, the district should immediately establish a committee that will provide the governing board with the recommendation of the new school boundaries. This committee should be representative of all stakeholders who have a strong interest in the school community, especially in the area of student achievement.

Make-up of the committee

One potential model for a district could include the following: three district administrators; three certificated association members; three classified association members; and seven parents—several from the school that represent the district as well as from the school that will be closed. These parents provide input from each of the affected school areas and serve as a voice for the public when the committee hosts a public forum. It also indicates to community members that their

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voices are highly regarded and a real priority.

Finally, the committee needs a chairperson. Ideally, this would be a respected individual from the district staff who can clearly communicate the purpose, function and goals of the district and the committee.

Committee members should:

- Represent broad levels of the district community.
- Meet on occasions that are convenient for the parents who are selected for the committee (early evenings may be ideal).
- Be extremely professional and committed to providing recommendations to the governing board that are well thought-out and focus on the students in the district.
- Be prepared for intensive discussion, problem-solving and creative thinking.

Committee goals and objectives

Once a committee has been established, the goals and objectives of the committee need to be determined and agreed upon by the committee members. These would serve as the key components for determining district boundaries. One example would be:

- Students should live as close to their school as possible (neighborhood schools).
- Safety issues (minimize crossing of major streets/highways).
- Student enrollment should match design capacity of schools.
- Minimize transportation requirements for student bussing.
- Establish clean feeder patterns.
- Keep "perceived" neighborhoods together at one site.
- Balance schools by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc. (to the extent possible).

Tasks to be implemented

While there should be no limit to the number of committee meetings that take place, there should be specific steps in the process that can be implemented over several meetings. The steps may include:

1. Review current boundaries

- Have 11 x 14 maps available to committee members indicating current boundaries.
- Use software (currently available) that identifies all students within the Student Attendance Zone areas that make up each

school boundary – this should include gender, ethnicity and grade level of students currently residing in these areas.

2. Review possible new boundaries

- Follow criteria previously discussed to develop possible new boundaries.
- Break committee up into four or five smaller groups, each consisting of representative members of the entire group.
- Have each group identify pros/cons of each boundary and share these with group.
- Determine the strongest elements of each boundary proposal and incorporate into one final boundary that will represent the committee's initial recommendation.
- Utilize software that displays the pro-

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posed new boundaries, along with the student make-up within these boundaries, as a tool to discuss the final boundary recommendations. An LCD projector to display these boundaries, along with the impact of modifying various configurations, provides a useful resource in the discussion on how this relates to the criteria being used.

3. Provide the board with preliminary recommendations

- Include as many committee members as possible in the actual presentation.
- Provide an overview of the process that was used.
- Provide preliminary recommendations for new boundaries and share key details that led to these recommendations.
- Obtain feedback from the governing board on changes they would like.
- Ask the governing board for direction to move forward by presenting the recommendations to the community at large (in a minimum of two meetings that are well advertised).

4. Hold an at-large community meeting

Planning, scheduling and conducting the at-large community meeting is the next highest priority. This is the time that any potential concerns and issues will be raised by the community. It is also an opportunity for the district to gain the support of the community by presenting a plan that is solid and well thought-out. Therefore, the highest level of planning is critical and should include:

- Wide communication of the meeting to all interested community members.
- Letters sent home to students.
- Reminder notices sent out to students.
- Information in school newsletters and on school Web sites.
- Proposed boundary maps printed in the local paper and displayed on the district and school Web sites.
- Utilization of a telephone notification system to provide all parents with phone call reminders.

5. Structure the agenda

Once the details and planning of the community meetings have been finalized, it is important to structure the agenda of the meeting in a manner that will keep the district in control of the agenda while also providing the members of the community with an opportunity to provide input. An example of this could be as follows:

- I. Introduction/welcome (chairperson)
- I. Purpose/function/goals of committee (chairperson)
- III. Recommendation of new boundaries (all committee members)
- IV. Community input
- V. Next steps/timeline
- VI. Closure

One key recommendation would be to have five or six large maps available that illustrate the new student boundaries. These maps can be posted at stations along the walls of the auditorium or multi-use room where the meeting is being conducted. Posted at each of these stations could be two or three members of the committee who were involved in the process. These committee members can provide an explanation of why the boundaries were recommended and answer any other questions that are raised.

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It is important to ensure that committee members who act in this role were thoroughly involved in the meetings and are supportive of the process. These individuals can serve as excellent resources.

6. Gather community input

Community input can be taken as they are reviewing the large maps. A scribe can document their concerns and these can be organized/compiled later. Or, the chairperson can call everyone back together in their seats and ask for comments (which can also be documented and compiled later). The latter poses a risk that the meeting might turn negative, so careful consideration should be given prior to using this option.

The community should be informed that its input will be considered and an update will be provided to the board that includes their concerns. If any of the concerns can be incorporated into a revised plan, every effort should be given to include this recommen-

dation if it improves the quality of the final recommendation. Some additional recommendations may include the following:

- Intra-district requests: Give priority to students affected by the school closure if they would like to attend a different school that is outside their new boundary location (space permitting).
- Safety: Have the district safety specialist work with the city to review crossing guard placements, routes to school, and any other potential issues to ensure student safety.
- Open house: Ask all principals to host an open house in the spring prior to the new year, inviting and encouraging all parents to attend. Include a very positive, welcoming program that illustrates how excited the school is to welcome all students.

7. Prepare for final board approval

Finally, the committee will prepare for board approval. Members of the committee should be prepared to provide the governing board with a presentation, similar to the

previous one, that will include the feedback provided by community members and why their input was or was not included in the final recommendation. The implementation schedule for the new boundaries should also be provided, along with how this information will be communicated to all affected individuals so plenty of time can be provided for necessary planning.

Overall, changing school boundaries will always be a very difficult and challenging decision. While this decision will be hard, going through the process above will enable the governing board to know that this important decision was made only after a process was implemented that was thorough, highly communicated, and included strong participation from the community at large. ■

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