



## **PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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### **Memorandum**

October 4, 2011

To: Board of Education

CC: Carole Smith, Superintendent

From: Robb Cowie, Executive Director, Community Involvement and Public Affairs

RE: Community engagement protocol

#### **Introduction**

This memo provides an overview of a draft community engagement protocol that is intended to establish a consistent, authentic and equitable framework to guide how PPS engages stakeholders. This draft protocol also responds to the superintendent's commitment to develop a standard community engagement process, as expressed in the staff memo accompanying Board resolution 4406 ("Temporary Relief Measure for Alameda Elementary," February, 2011).

This framework:

- Brings greater transparency to our decision-making by clarifying how stakeholders will be involved in an engagement process and our commitment to support that form of participation.
- Ensures that school communities and neighborhoods can rely on Portland Public Schools to inform them about major school district decisions in standard and specific ways.
- Establishes that PPS will ensure that underserved communities receive necessary and differentiated support to ensure their participation, including culturally responsive outreach, language support, and alternative mechanisms for providing input.

We will begin piloting this framework this school year, in anticipation of formally adopting it for the future.

#### **How we intend to use the stakeholder participation process (SPP)**

Like any large urban school district, Portland Public Schools frequently makes decisions that affect multiple stakeholder groups. In many cases, these decisions are complex and controversial. As a result, it is important for the school district to make the best possible decisions, informed by meaningful and constructive community input.

Therefore, we must ensure that we have the tools to deliver consistent, authentic and equitable stakeholder engagement across the different neighborhoods and constituencies that are contained within our school district. The attached Stakeholder Participation Process (SPP) is designed to provide that tool.

The SPP tool is based on national best practices, including the “spectrum of participation” developed by the International Association of Public Participation and the work of Anne Carroll, a national public participation consultant (also a St. Paul, MN school board member), who has trained CIPA staff on principles of equitable public engagement. This process was also reviewed by the Superintendent’s Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer (SACET) – the committee expressed a great degree of interest in seeing the SPP tool used in student assignment and boundary change processes.

We anticipate that this process would be a standard process that staff would follow in seeking stakeholder input on major PPS decisions, in particular:

- Student assignment changes
- School closure and grade reconfiguration
- Major changes in educational programs affecting schools district-wide.

Departments and schools would also be encouraged and supported to use this process. To test whether the SPP delivers on its intended outcomes, during the 2011-2012 school year we will apply it to:

- Enrollment balancing process
- MWESB policy
- Other engagement processes, as applicable.

### **Key elements of Stakeholder Participation Process**

The SPP tool requires staff to develop a clear stakeholder engagement plan prior to launching a major initiative, to ensure that the process can proceed with transparency, with specifically defined steps to inform and include diverse stakeholders, and an assessment of the resources required to fulfill the plan. Some of the important steps in the plan include:

- **Define problems and identify decision-makers:** At the outset, it is important to understand and define the problem well, so we can seek the best input from the community. It is also important for stakeholders to understand the decision-making process and who makes the final decision, so that all participants have a clear understanding of their roles and how their participation will affect the process.

The SPP tool also asks staff to recognize and anticipate that an engagement process may have multiple phases, and to plan accordingly. The objectives of the process and the role of decision-makers may be different at different stages of a well-designed and well-executed engagement process.

- **Clarify levels of participation for stakeholders and PPS’ corresponding commitment:** There are different potential levels of stakeholder participation (see p.2 of attached Stakeholder Participation Process). This spectrum of participation ranges from “inform” (in which stakeholders participate by receiving information) to “empower” (in which stakeholders participate by making the actual decision).

***It is important to recognize that there is no hierarchy of value attached to any specific level of participation on the spectrum.*** There are times when ‘inform’ is the most appropriate and authentic form of participation: for example, in an emergency situation or in response to a decision that is limited by statutory or similar requirements. There are other times when a more participatory level of

involvement is needed. The SPP tool encourages staff to look for the earliest opportunity to engage stakeholder input and to use the spectrum to consider the most constructive way for stakeholders to be involved in the process.

Being clear and transparent about the level of stakeholder participation is essential in this framework, because each ***level of participation invokes an associated level of commitment from the school district to support that level of participation.***

For example, if PPS asks stakeholders to ‘collaborate,’ then we are committing to honoring that level of participation in a defined way: *We will seek stakeholder input into devising options and potential solutions, and incorporating their recommendations in a final decision to the maximum extent possible.* That commitment is different than the commitments we would make if stakeholders were participating by being ‘involved’ or ‘empowered.’

Being clear about how different levels of participation are defined and – our commitment to meeting that defined level of participation – can help level-set expectations throughout each stakeholder process and help both stakeholders and PPS staff understand what is being asked of them, so they can work together in the most effective way.

Finally, the SPP tool recognizes that there may be multiple phases to a stakeholder engagement process, with different levels of participation and different commitments occurring as the engagement process develops.

For example, in Phase I, there may be upfront ‘collaboration’ with a representative group of parents or staff in developing potential solutions to an issue facing a school. Following that initial stage of engagement, school district staff may then take those options to the broader school community for ‘consultation’ in Phase II, before a final decision is reached by the superintendent or school board. After that decision is made, staff would then make a Phase III commitment to ‘inform’ the school community about the decision and how it will be effectively implemented (or, in turn, PPS staff could decide to ‘involve’ the school community in the implementation of the decision). Again, one level of participation is not inherently superior or inferior to another – what level of participation is appropriate and authentic depends on the particular circumstances involved in each situation.

- **Identify stakeholders and address barriers:** In planning each stakeholder engagement process, the SPP tool requires staff to identify the:
  - Range of stakeholders who may need to be engaged in each process.
  - Impact of the decisions on stakeholder groups.
  - Barriers to stakeholder participation.
  - Differential levels of influence that different stakeholder groups hold.

Plans to engage stakeholders should address the specific barriers that may impede the equitable participation of different communities. Outreach should be both culturally and linguistically competent – meaning that school district staff should ensure that interpretation and translation is appropriately provided, and that plans should consider alternative forms of outreach to support the full participation of diverse communities. (The SPP tool will integrate an equity lens, which is currently being developed, to help shape culturally appropriate outreach efforts.)

In addition, the SPP tool requires school district staff to take standard steps to notify key communities about proposed boundary changes, school closures and/or grade reconfiguration processes. Steps for different stakeholders could include:

- School communities: staff will notify families and staff through established communication channels (letters, auto-dialers, etc.) and school leadership groups, such as site councils and PTAs.
  - Neighborhoods: staff will provide notification to neighborhood coalitions to provide community members an opportunity to participate.
- **Evaluation:** The SPP tool provides a mechanism for staff to provide formative and summative reflections on what worked and what did not in each engagement process, to foster continuous learning and improvement, so these lessons can be incorporated into future stakeholder engagement efforts.

### **Formalizing use of the SPP tool**

This year, we are instituting a cross-departmental “user” group, to help apply the pilot SPP tool and evaluate its use.

If the SPP tool proves valuable, we will develop a formal administrative directive to define when and how it should be used to support better and more standardized community engagement. We will also develop on-line planning tools and offer training to ensure that it can be used easily and with fidelity by PPS staff.

### **Conclusion**

Because education is so critically important to families and communities, Portland Public Schools’ stakeholder engagement efforts will frequently attract a high degree of community interest and scrutiny. The standardized stakeholder engagement process that we will pilot this year will not ensure that there is consensus on every decision. However, by formally incorporating internationally-accepted best practices in a standardized way, we can bring greater planning, transparency and consistency to our outreach efforts. By doing so, we will be in a better position to demonstrate to the community that we have sought meaningful and authentic community input and made good faith efforts to encourage equitable participation in each process.