Building Bridges:
The Imperative of Community Engagement in K-12 Education

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In the past, the community was rarely involved in the K-12 education design process. This has led to masses of outdated schools that lack the educational environments today's students and communities have come to expect.

Technological advancements, sustainable elements, and pedagogies that accommodate various learning styles are all essential features of modern educational environments. However, many schools grapple with buildings constructed when these design goals were not integrated, and community input was seldom sought.

Additionally, limited funding often hinders districts from budgeting for the costly upgrades needed to meet the evolving needs of students and their communities. To implement these necessary upgrades, school districts often pursue Capital Improvement Projects (CIP), which require a referendum vote for approval since they are partially or fully funded by taxpayers.

School districts must start engaging with the community to secure those critical "Yes" votes.

Numerous studies show that inviting stakeholders—such as parents, educators, local business owners, community leaders, residents and students—into the design process results in educational environments that better serve the needs of both the students and the community.

WHAT IS AN ENGAGED COMMUNITY AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

At its core, community engagement in K-12 education design bridges the gap between schools and the communities they're embedded in. It creates a sense of ownership and shared responsibility among stakeholders, transforming them from passive observers into active participants who directly influence students' educational outcomes.

Research consistently shows that strong community ties also lead to facilities that better meet users' needs and expectations. Additional benefits of community engagement include:

Enhanced Buy-In and Support: When community members are involved in planning and decision-making, they are more likely to support school initiatives, including funding and bond referendums, which is crucial for the success of large-scale projects and ongoing programs.

Informed Decision-Making: Community engagement offers valuable insights and feedback from those directly impacted by the projects, yielding programs and facilities that cater to the needs of students and the community rather than relying on assumptions or top-down directives.

Improved Student Outcomes: Research shows that strong community ties and parental involvement are linked to numerous improved student outcomes. For example, a case study of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District highlights that schools with higher community involvement experienced significantly improved student performance, attendance and graduation rates.[1]

Sustainable and Effective: Schools developed with community input can more efficiently adapt to unexpected challenges. This adaptability is partly due to the inclusive culture and strong sense of community ownership that such engagement promotes, leading to more resilient educational environments.[2]

Shared Ownership and Responsibility: When community members feel they have a stake in the school's success, they are more invested in its outcomes. As demonstrated in the Coalition for Community Schools' case study, schools engaging with their communities see increased involvement and commitment from parents and local organizations, resulting in improved student performance and stronger community-school relationships.[3]

"Research highlights the success of schools with robust community ties, showcasing enhanced performance, attendance, and graduation rates."

THE POWER OF AN INVOLVED COMMUNITY

Studies show that schools designed with community input directly enhance students' educational progression, health, cognitive performance, academic development, attendance rates, and more.

Better Reading and Math Scores

Research increasingly demonstrates that involving community stakeholders in the K-12 design and programming process positively impacts student test scores.

In a case study from the Harvard Family Research Project, schools with comprehensive community engagement strategies saw a 20% increase in student reading scores and a 25% increase in math scores over a three-year period.[4]

Another study examining school design and its influence on learning development is The Clever Classrooms Study out of the University of Salford Manchester. This study examined the academic performance in reading, writing, and math of 3,766 students in 27 schools.[5]

This study found that personalized spaces that reflect students' interests and values can improve student performance and greater satisfaction with school facilities.

Improved Student Behavior

In addition to academic benefits, community engagement fosters a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

Studies have shown that adopting the "Community Schools" model, which integrates academic, health and social services through community partnerships, increases student well-being and reduces absenteeism. For instance, a report by the Learning Policy Institute found that select schools in New York City that followed this model experienced a 7% reduction in chronic absenteeism and a 12% increase in graduation rates.[6]

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

CPL has long partnered with districts to develop master plans, CIPs and individual school renovations. Every project presented unique challenges and opportunities, allowing our teams to engage deeply with the communities we serve. This commitment has been crucial in ensuring that our projects meet educational needs and accurately reflect the aspirations and values of the community.

The CIPs completed at **Spackenkill Union Free School District** and the **Monticello Central School District** both exemplify how effective community engagement can be integrated into the K-12 planning and design process.

SPACKENKILL UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Project Overview

Located in Poughkeepsie, NY, the Spackenkill Union Free School District (UFSD) serves families and professionals primarily associated with the nearby IBM campus and other local businesses. CPL has been helping the district maintain and upgrade their aging facilities for several years. Our latest efforts, a Capital Bond Project, involved numerous upgrades and additions to Spackenkill High School.

In addition to critical upgrades to items such as windows, doors, roofs, mechanical systems, and fire alarms, we assisted the district in making much-needed improvements to the high school's track and field—a project that impacted not only Spackenkill but the entire community at large.

Over time, we've learned that a high school's athletic field is more than a place where students fulfill their physical education requirements. It often serves as a point of pride for communities and instills a sense of belonging to those who use it, which is why this track and field became a focal point of our community engagement efforts.

Before the CIP, Spackenkill High School's athletic fields were in disrepair. Uneven surfaces, poor drainage, and worn-out turf created a high risk of injury for student-athletes. Figure 1 shows the previous conditions of the field.

Figure 1: The state of the athletic fields at Spackenkill High School before the CIP, highlighting the need for urgent upgrades.

With new artificial turf, a reconstructed and repaved track and a variety of complimentary features like new bleachers and scoreboards, the turf field has since profoundly impacted the school's students and community. The improved athletic facilities at Spackenkill High not only allow athletes to train and perform consistently but also quickly became a central hub for community activities, providing a safe space for sports and recreation (see Figures 2 and 3).

This transformation underscores the power of creating facilities that benefit both the school and the broader community, enhancing the overall quality of life for all involved.

Figure 2: The upgraded turf field at Spackenkill High School.

Figure 3: Spackenkill's repaved track.

Community Engagement Methods Used

Many Spackenkill community members initially hesitated or opposed the CIP, questioning its necessity and financial impact. Recognizing this, CPL strategically used the proposed new turf field as a focal point to draw in community members and spark broader interest in the planned improvements.

We used various engagement methods during the planning and design to ensure community members felt informed, involved and heard. These strategies included:

1. Community Forums and Meetings

Approach: CPL and Spackenkill UFSD organized a series of community forums and meetings to address concerns and gather input. These events provided detailed project information and allowed stakeholders to voice opinions and ask questions.

Outcome: These forums were crucial in dispelling misinformation and building trust. Addressing misconceptions about the turf field's impact on taxes and the environment shifted the public opinion from skepticism to support (see Figure 4).

2. Advisory Committees

Approach: Advisory committees, comprising parents, students, local business owners, and community members, were established to discuss project updates and offer feedback regularly.

Outcome: Including diverse stakeholders and local business owners helped address concerns about the tax levy's economic impact, resulting in a widely accepted proposal.

3. Grassroots Communication

Approach: A campaign was launched, which involved distributing mailers and postcards with detailed project information along with yard and construction signs and a CBP logo (see Figure 5).

Outcome: These materials were instrumental in countering misinformation, which helped rally community support, particularly among parents and students who stood to benefit directly from the new facilities.
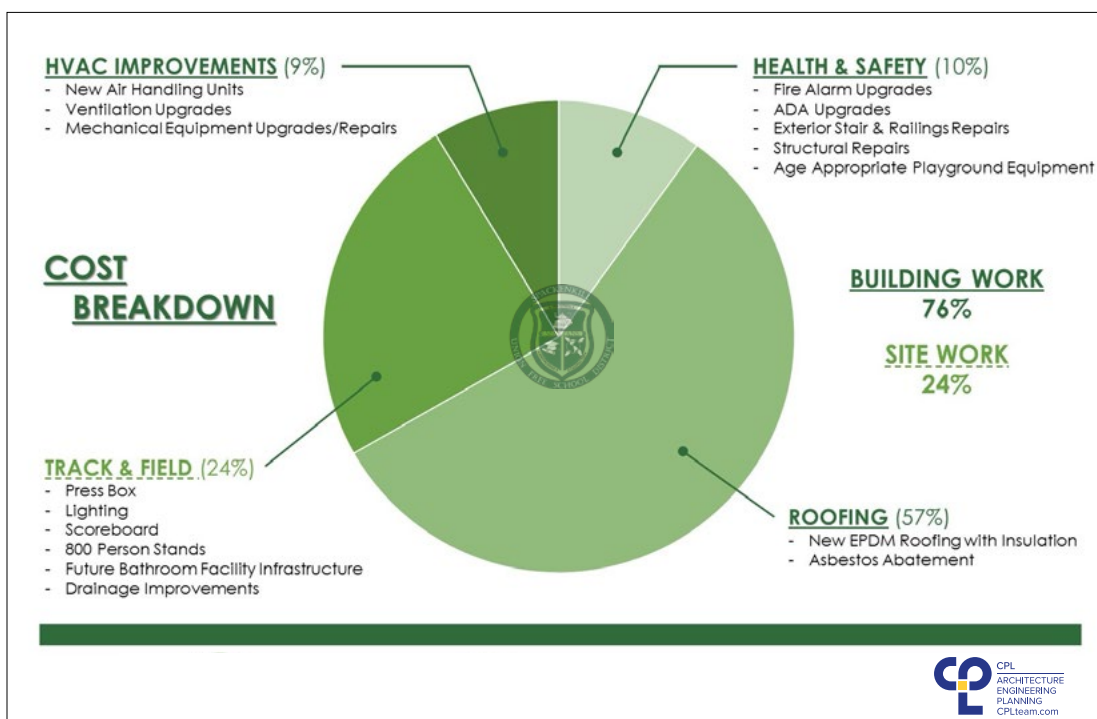

Figure 4: One of the PowerPoint slides shown during these meetings.

4. Feedback Mechanisms

Approach: Throughout the planning and implementation phases, various methods like surveys, online polls and suggestion boxes at community meetings were employed.

Outcome: Community input highlighted the need for the proposed turf field and track to be accessible to the public outside of school hours, fostering a sense of community ownership and ensuring the facility served a broader purpose.

Despite initial opposition, the project received overwhelming support in the public vote, largely due to effective communication and inclusive engagement efforts. Each of these strategies played a crucial role in building trust and gaining the necessary support to move forward with the project.
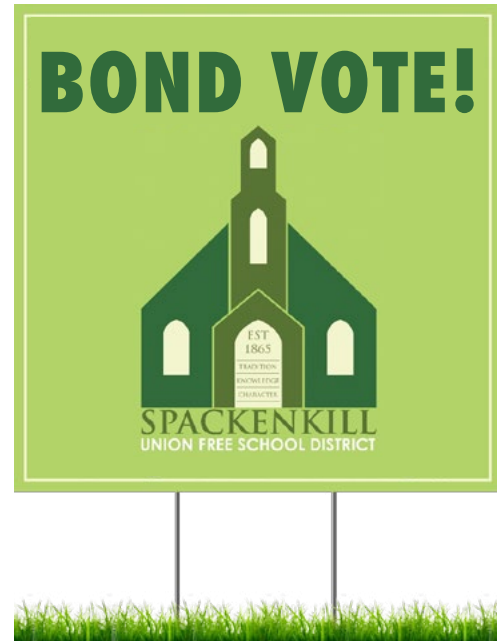

Figure 5: Spackenkill CBP yard sign.

Figures 6 and 7: A dimly lit, outdated corridor and classroom at Monticello High, pre-renovations.

MONTICELLO CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Project Overview

Monticello Central School District serves a diverse, growing community in Sullivan County, NY. Spanning 630,000 sq. ft., the district's seven buildings were plagued by outdated mechanical systems, insufficient natural lighting and structural issues that significantly hampered the educational environment (see Figures 6 and 7).

Recognizing the need for revitalization, the Monticello CSD Board of Education launched a master plan and Bond Project to upgrade its aging infrastructure and selected CPL to lead the initiative.

Much of the project focused on updating the district's high school, which had not seen major improvements since the 1950s. The strategic overhaul included an exterior reskinning to boost energy efficiency and aesthetic appeal;

upgrading mechanical systems to improve air quality and occupant comfort; replacing windows and doors to enhance security and natural light; updating fire alarms and safety systems to meet current standards; and improving outdoor areas such as parking lots, walkways and green spaces. Figures 8 and 9 show the before and after of the school's outdoor courtyard.

Figure 8 (above left) shows Monticello High's outdoor courtyard before the renovations. Figure 9 (left bottom) shows the updated courtyard, showing drastic improvements.

Several spaces within the high school were renovated to create flexible learning environments. This included modernizing classrooms with new furniture and technology and establishing a maker space to support STEM

Figure 10 (above top): a modernized classroom at Monticello High. Figure 11 (above bottom): the new maker space supporting STEM education.

education. See Figures 10 and 11 for the school's upgraded interiors.

Additionally, the old, non-OSHA-compliant bus garage was replaced with a new facility, addressing major safety and environmental concerns (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Monticello High's new bus garage.

Outcome

These upgrades have transformed the district's facilities, significantly benefiting students, staff and the broader community by providing safe and flexible educational environments that promote academic excellence.

Post-renovation, Monticello High School has been transformed into a healthy and engaging learning environment with abundant natural light, improved air quality and updated facilities. These upgrades have since boosted academic performance and overall well-being, aligning with the principles highlighted in the "Clever Classrooms" study.

There has also been a notable increase in attendance rates among students and staff. Overall, the renovation has made Monticello High School a more conducive place for learning, enhancing educational experiences and strengthening the community's connection to the institution.

Community Engagement Methods Used

Many community members were skeptical about the necessity and financial impact of the proposed improvements. To address these concerns, we implemented various engagement strategies aimed at educating the community about the project's benefits, gathering feedback and incorporating community input into the planning process.

These strategies involved:

1. Community Forums and Meetings

Approach: These forums provided a platform for transparent communication, allowing residents to ask questions and express concerns. During these sessions, we explained how funding mechanisms would cover a significant portion of the expenses and informed stakeholders how these improvements could directly impact students' educational outcomes (see Figure 13).

Outcome: The community's apprehensions over the project's cost and necessity were addressed, helping them understand that the local financial burden would be minimized.

Figure 13: One of the PowerPoint presentation slides shown to stakeholders during a referendum meeting.

2. Campaigning and Branding

Approach: The campaign incorporated grassroots efforts such as distributing informational mailers and postcards and leveraging social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Figure 14). Additionally, the project was branded with a unique logo to give it a distinct identity, and T-shirts were created to rally support.

Outcome: These strategies helped unify the community around the project. The mailers countered misinformation and provided

clear information about the project's benefits and financial structure, while social media engagement allowed for broader reach and interaction with the community.

Figure 14: A social media post we created for Monticello CSD.

3. Feedback Mechanisms

Approach: Various feedback mechanisms such as surveys, online polls and suggestion boxes during meetings enabled residents to provide input and feel involved in decision-making.

Outcome: Collecting feedback was crucial in tailoring the project to meet the community's needs. For instance, the feedback highlighted the importance of modernizing classrooms and facilities to improve the overall learning environment, which was incorporated into the project plans.

These engagement approaches were essential to ensure the community felt heard and involved, ultimately leading to the approval of the $54 million capital bond project.

REAL-LIFE SUCCESS STORIES: SPACKENKILL AND MONTICELLO

The Spackenkill and Monticello school districts are prime examples of how involving the community can lead to substantial benefits and positive changes in educational environments.

Tangible Benefits at Play

The following experiences of Spackenkill UFSD and Monticello CSD demonstrate the dynamic potential of community engagement, providing a blueprint for other districts to follow:

1. Higher Success Rates for Bond Approval and Project Implementation

Benefit: When stakeholders are well-informed and feel their voices are heard, they are more likely to vote in favor of funding initiatives for capital bonds and other projects.

Example: Extensive outreach helped address concerns and provide clear information in both Spackenkill UFSD and Monticello CSD, leading to the public approval of capital funding.

2. Enhanced Program Definition and Satisfaction

Benefit: Projects that involve community input are more likely to meet the needs and expectations of end users, resulting in higher satisfaction with the outcome.

Example: In Spackenkill, constructing a new turf field addressed the community's demand for improved athletic facilities, while Monticello stakeholders expressed their desire for enhanced outdoor spaces. The project's implementation of these ideas ultimately increased pride and satisfaction among students, parents and residents alike (Figure 15).

3. Increased Trust and Goodwill

Benefit: When community members feel their input is valued and acted upon, it builds trust and goodwill. This positive relationship is crucial for the school district's long-term success, as it fosters ongoing support for future projects.

Example: Despite initial resistance, the Monticello CSD improvement project ultimately garnered strong community support through transparent

communication and educational outreach, which helped promote trust in the school administration.

4. Improved Student Outcomes

Benefit: Well-designed educational facilities that reflect community input can enhance student performance, higher attendance rates and overall well-being. As mentioned before, the Clever Classrooms study from the University of Salford Manchester has shown that better-designed classrooms positively impact student performance and attendance.

Example: The renovation of Monticello High School included upgrading outdated classrooms and incorporating natural light, significantly improving the learning environment.

Figure 15: The vibrant outdoor spaces incorporated in Monticello High's designs feature various seating options, beautiful landscaping and a community garden.

ADDRESSING COMMON BARRIERS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Engaging the community in K-12 education projects presents several challenges, which can vary significantly depending on the socio-economic and cultural context of the district. The featured case studies of Spackenkill UFSD

and Monticello CSD highlight common barriers and provide insights into effective strategies for overcoming these obstacles, which include:

1. Miscommunication

Challenge: Misinformation and rumors can spread quickly, leading to misunderstandings and resistance to school projects. This issue was particularly evident in the Spackenkill UFSD project, where misinformation campaigns attempted to derail the project.

Solution: Combat misinformation by proactively disseminating accurate and comprehensive information. Use multiple channels, including mailers, community meetings and social media, to ensure all stakeholders receive the same information. Visual aids such as diagrams, pie charts and fact sheets can also help clarify complex financial data and project details (Figure 16).

Figure 16: A fact sheet for Spackenkill UFSD.

2. Economic Concerns

Challenge: In economically disadvantaged areas like Monticello CSD, residents may be reluctant to support projects due to concerns about increased taxes and financial strain.

Solution: Highlighting the role of grants and other funding mechanisms can alleviate fears about local tax burdens. Educational outreach should focus on explaining the long-term economic benefits of the projects, such as improved property values and reduced operational costs through energy-efficient upgrades.

3. Engagement Fatigue

Challenge: Stakeholders may experience engagement fatigue, especially in communities where previous efforts have not yielded the desired results. This can lead to apathy and low participation rates.

Solution: Keep engagement efforts dynamic and relevant. Use various engagement methods, such as community forums, online surveys and social media interactions, to reach a broader audience. Tailor communication to address the specific interests and concerns of different stakeholder groups, making engagement feel more personalized and impactful (Figure 17).
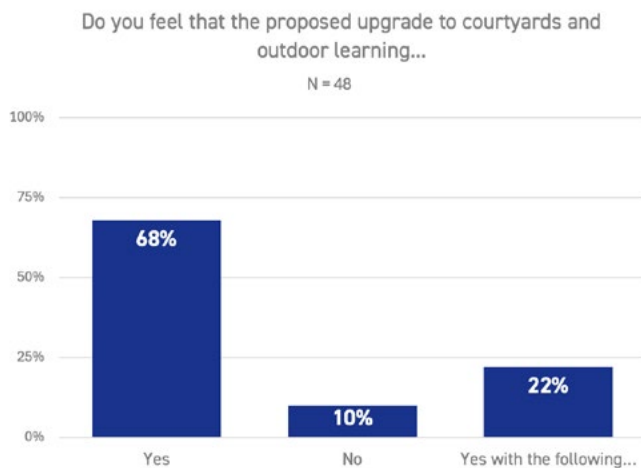

Figure 17: An example of an online survey designed to generate input and support.

Other Recommended Engagement Resources and Tools

In addition to the community engagement strategies already discussed, there are various resources and tools available, such as:

1. Utilize community engagement toolkits provided by educational organizations and governmental agencies. These often include templates for surveys, guidelines for organizing forums and strategies for effective communication.

2. Use easily accessible online survey platforms like SurveyMonkey or Google Forms to collect feedback and gauge community sentiment.

3. Employ visual communication tools like infographics, charts and virtual reality (VR) walkthroughs to help the community visualize project outcomes and understand complex information (Figure 18).

Figure 18: A VR walkthrough in action.

A CORNERSTONE OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Research consistently shows the numerous benefits of community engagement in K-12 education. Inclusive engagement strategies directly influence improved student outcomes, higher attendance rates and stronger community-school relationships.

Furthermore, the engagement techniques implemented in both the Spackenkill and Monticello capital projects resulted in facilities with enhanced infrastructure, decreased safety hazards and, most importantly, modern and flexible learning environments that support student success and well-being.

Community engagement is not just an additional step in the project planning process; as evidenced by these projects, it is a foundational design element that can drive positive change in K-12 education. Designers, school administrators and stakeholders alike must prioritize and implement effective engagement strategies to ensure the success and sustainability of educational initiatives.

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