

THE ROLE OF CIVIC KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION AND HOW SCHOOL OFFICIALS CAN EXPAND IT

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to share and report the results of a citizen training program designed to expand civic knowledge in the operation of a local school district (know-how), build rapport between citizens and district officials (know-who), and raise the district's capacity for citizen participation in district affairs. Simultaneously an objective was developing and refining a model for school districts and other institutions ready to increase the public's role in problem solving and decision making. 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 five training domains studied, this paper focuses on findings for the domains of knowledge, relationships, and action as well as the secondary ripple effects of know-how and know-who from participants to others who did not participate in the training.

Keywords: civic knowledge, parent engagement, public education, school district administration, public participation, public deliberation, social capital

INTRODUCTION

Burned into this researcher's memory is an occurrence at a school board meeting when a district-level administrator delivered a presentation to the board concerning several proposed boundary scenarios for a new elementary school. The presentation concluded with a recommendation by the administrator as to which one of three boundary scenarios should be considered based on school bus routes, population projections, and other institutional concerns. Present in the audience were citizens from the very geographic area where the new school was being constructed. As the administrator's presentation progressed, the level of agitation among the citizens grew. When they could no longer contain their disapproval, they broke with the rules of order addressing the board members and voiced their opinions aloud, that they had never seen or heard the scenarios before nor been asked for their input. The uneasy board members wisely postponed their decision until after staff had conducted a public meeting to deliberate on issues concerning boundaries for the new school and to obtain community feedback. As the district's newly hired communications manager, I was heartened by the board's actions.

The administrative maneuver described above is an example of what Yosie and Herbst (1998) refer to as *decide, announce and defend* decision making, commonly used in one form or another to obtain a preferred and pre-determined outcome. Apart from damaging public trust and compromising buy in, closed decision making processes, which impact the public such as this one tend to be overly influenced by system professionals, are commonly pushed forward without the benefit of public scrutiny, and often are flawed. And, the author of the present paper ask, for what gain? Administrators may be comfortable conducting business and making decisions without the public, but lose the opportunity to work through complex or controversial problems with parents and other stakeholders (Poynton, Makela & Haddad, 2014).

Coleman and Gotze (2001) find that excluding the public from decision making processes does not ensure their passivity. On the contrary, when ignored the public is likely to become actively hostile to institutional processes and pursue another agenda. In fact, says Mathews (2006), stakeholders can become so angry and mistrustful of the system that they abandon any commitment to the common good and pursue purely self-interested agendas and outcomes. When education leaders become so confident in their professional training, experience, and position, they may see no need to engage citizens in school business. The practice of sidelining the public from school business may be more extensive than one might expect. McNeil (2002) states, "There has perhaps been no time in our history when the links between public education and democracy have been as tenuous as they are right now" (p. 243).

In school districts where the will to engage the public does exist, administrators frequently lack the skills needed to design and facilitate deliberative processes and effectively work through contentious issues. To

address this, Feldman and Khademian (2007) advocate that public administrators become effective facilitators of public participation, and Fischer (2009) calls for a new generation of professionals adept in convening and facilitating public processes. Yankelovich (2010) states that institutions must more effectively assist citizens to “...work through the issues and move steadily along the learning curve” (p. 6). Education leaders can no longer afford to permit problem solving and decision making processes that ignore or diminish the public’s role, however sensitive or controversial the topic. Rather, education leaders must strive to increase the capacity of their organization for “effective, inclusive, deliberative problem solving” (Kadlec & Friedman, 2010, p. 132), even if it means acquiring new skills.

Like many school districts across the United States, St. Vrain Valley Schools (Colorado) has navigated the rough waters resulting from invasive school reforms, state funding cuts, and administrative missteps that alienated citizens and heightened public mistrust. However, a new leadership team at St. Vrain Valley Schools took the position that administrative maneuvers or other practices that reduced or excluded the public from school district business were no longer acceptable. Further, with the full support of a new superintendent, the team initiated an innovative citizen training program designed to strengthen the district’s capacity for stakeholder engagement. The purpose of this paper is to share and report the results of the citizen training program designed to expand civic knowledge, engage citizens in their school district, and raise the district’s capacity for public participation in district affairs. It is further hoped that the program may serve as a model for school districts and other institutions ready to increase the public’s role in problem solving and decision making.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public participation has been 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). A core value of public participation is that the people, individuals and groups, who are affected by a decision, should have an opportunity to participate in making it. With an effective culture of engagement, leaders can expect more sustainable decision making, increased stakeholder buy-in and trust, and increased overall public support for education and the school district. Increasing capacity for informed engagement and deliberation has become especially important given rising levels of expectation for students’ academic achievement and the growing scarcity of material and human resources and other increasingly complex problems facing public schools.

Mathews (2006) stated that accountability measures alone would not satisfy the public’s need to know, instead they wanted face-to-face exchanges with educators and a more comprehensive understanding of what was happening at school and in education overall. Kernan-Schloss and Plattner (1998) urged school leaders to develop a cohort of informed stakeholders who were sufficiently familiar with and could effectively speak about important issues. For McDermott (1999), this meant parents going beyond the traditional roles of school parent teacher association (PTA) members, which are traditionally disconnected from a district’s

bigger picture policy concerns and state legislative initiatives. To cultivate tolerance for the values and beliefs of others, another component of capacity-building is helping stakeholders develop an awareness and appreciation for people who think differently than they do Conklin (as cited in Christensen, 2009) emphasized the importance of the stakeholders' ability to understand the positions of other individuals and to work together effectively and solve problems.

To raise St. Vrain's capacity for public participation, leaders planned an extended citizen training program with two primary objectives. First, to provide citizens in-depth institutional information about how the school district functions (knowledge Poynton (2012) refers to as *know-how*) and, second, to provide relationship-building opportunities with key education leaders at both the local and state level (referred to by Poynton (2012) as *know-who*). The Leadership St. Vrain (LSV) training was offered to all parents across the district meeting one morning a month throughout the academic year. Recruitment was carried out by invitations disseminated via the school district's email system, the district's website, and announcements in local papers. In addition to the *know-how* and *know-who* components, LSV participants were exposed to concepts associated with deliberative decision making and both the challenges and benefits for people and institutions doing the hard work of working through shared problems. The initiative was launched in 2009 and is in its 5th year of implementation (2013-14).

TRAINING CURRICULUM

The LSV training takes place over the course of an academic school year in once a month sessions (for 8 months) each approximately 2.5 hours in length. The superintendent of schools participates at every meeting and, starts each meeting with a 15-20 minute overview of education- and district-related concerns. The superintendent's overview includes detailed information about top-of-mind issues, high profile media stories, and new initiatives from the school board or the state legislature. Participants have the opportunity to discuss issues with the superintendent in greater detail and raise other questions and concerns. In addition to the information from the superintendent, his monthly attendance contributed to the 'know who' for greater familiarity and rapport with him. Similarly, the superintendent develops greater familiarity and rapport with the participants and hears their concerns first hand. Over the course of the year, the superintendent plays an all-important leadership role in disseminating valuable information (*know-how*) and creating opportunities for richer relationships between citizens and the district (*know-who*).

While the superintendent has a central role in the training sessions, participants are exposed to many other leaders during the training. This includes members of the superintendent's leadership team (internal leaders) and influential professionals and elected officials from the local and state community (external leaders). Involving these leaders, the LSV training was designed to ensure participants deepen their understanding about a wide variety of institutional topics (governance, policy, finance, curriculum, programs and services, safety, etc.), and meet to develop rapport with a variety of individuals who influence schools and may be a

source of additional information and assistance when needed. The internal and external leaders who are invited to make presentations are asked to bring their business cards or otherwise provide their contact information. By providing *know-how* and *know-who* to participants in this way, it is hoped they would more willingly to reach out with concerns and even de-bunk myths or rumors they learn to be untrue.

An essential component of the LSV training program is exposing participants to the concepts of public participation and deliberative problem solving and decision making. Two of the LSV training sessions are dedicated, in part, to presenting these concepts. The trainer, Martin Carcasson, Ph.D., serves as a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Colorado State University, where he also serves as Director for the Center for Public Deliberation. Dr. Carcasson has authored numerous academic articles on deliberative problem solving and he routinely facilitates public deliberation processes in and outside Colorado.

The following is a list of the LSV training sessions. See Appendix for a complete list of meeting presenters and typical questions and concerns voiced by participants to illustrate the potential of information sharing. In full disclosure, co-authors of this paper John Poynton, Ph.D. and Don Haddad, Ed.D., are employees of the St. Vrain Valley School District, serving in the capacity of Executive Director of Organizational Development and Communications and the Superintendent of Schools, respectively. Poynton and Haddad have played a direct role in the development and execution of the Leadership St. Vrain training program, scheduled to start its 6th year in the fall of 2014.

Meeting 1 – Meet and Greet

Purpose: First and foremost, to make initial introductions among the participants, the district personnel, and the LSV parent who helps lead the program and is a resource to participants and the district throughout the year. The first meeting provides an overview of the training curriculum and an opportunity for participants to ask questions about the format and share their interests in the program.

Meeting 2 – District Overview and Introduction to Public Participation (Part I)

Purpose: Provide a big picture view of the school district. This includes the strategic plan, the size, and demographics of the district including feeder systems, growth projections and implications for student funding, and other infrastructure-related topics. This meeting includes an introduction to the concept of public participation and how communities, and school districts in particular, can benefit when a growing number of stakeholders understand the value of deliberative problem solving.

Meeting 3 – Governance and Elected Officials

Purpose: Inform participants of the distinct leadership roles of the superintendent, the board president, and the board of education directors, including basic information about board member office terms, meeting schedules, and how citizens can contact their board director. The board president summarizes current board priorities and particular expectations it has of the superintendent.

Other local and state elected officials are invited to share their roles and priorities with regard to the district and public education in general. These individuals are encouraged to share their beliefs about public education and explain policy positions they have taken. Participants have the opportunity to share concerns with the elected officials and ask them questions. Whenever possible, this meeting includes the locally elected representative on the State Board of Education.

Meeting 4 – School Finance

Purpose: Provide a general overview of school funding from local, state, and federal sources, related laws and policies including state constitutional requirements and amendments, summary of state education budget and a review of the district’s budget, and current financial position. For the past five years, State Economist Natalie Mullis has travelled to the district to review the state budgeting process. Included in her presentation are funding scenarios for the next fiscal year, including predictions for education funding.

Meeting 5 – District Administration and Leadership

Purpose: Provide detailed information about key administrative leadership roles and duties including priorities in principal supervision and school-level leadership activities. This meeting includes an in-depth presentation on operations and maintenance, including school buildings, construction projects, transportation services, and nutrition services among other services of the district. The chief financial officer provides additional information pertaining to standing capital bond obligations and local tax levies supporting the district.

Meeting 6 – Schools, Curriculum, and School Safety

Purpose: Review relationships between the district’s assistant superintendents and the school principals under their supervision. This includes expectations concerning school leadership, academic achievement, curriculum, co- and extracurricular activities, communication, student discipline, safety and security, and community relations. Participants learn how to obtain valuable information concerning school performance and how to effectively raise concerns about students, the district, and their child’s school, principal, teacher, or other staff.

The District Safety Manager reviews policies and practices concerning student safety as well as a variety of building features and tools specifically designed to increase safety. The city Chief of Police details the department’s working relationship with the district and schools, including the district-wide school resource officer (SRO) program that stations trained, full-time police officers in secondary schools. The Chief of Police shares information about community policing and responds to questions about school safety, criminal behavior, and other police-related issues and concerns.

Meeting 7 – Instructional and Student Services

Purpose: To inform of the academic curricula opportunities across the district including instructional focus programs, instructional techniques, teacher training/professional development opportunities, and expectations concerning classroom instruction and the learning environment. Other programs and services

explained to participants include special education, gifted and talented, and co- and extracurricular programs in the performing arts, forensics, and athletics.

Meeting 8 – Technology and Public Participation (Part II)

Purpose: Explain and demonstrate the district’s technology infrastructure and the variety of tools to enhance classroom instruction. Also explained are the policies and practices relative to student expectations and safety in the online environment.

The final meeting of the training includes a second presentation by Dr. Martin Carcasson on public deliberation applications in the community and especially in a public school environment. The presentation is specifically designed to provide participants a working knowledge of collaborative problem solving and decision making to assist them with future engagement and/or leadership commitments they may choose to pursue--parent teacher organizations, school accountability committees, the school board, or other local and state held public offices.

METHODOLOGY

Three years after implementing the LSV training program, the lead author of this paper conducted a mixed-methods study of the program (Poynton, 2012) with quantitative surveys to learn if participants in two cohorts (years) of LSV gained know how and know who (civic knowledge) as a result of the training. The Research Integrity and Compliance Review Office of Colorado State University issued a Notice of Approval for Human Research (IRB Number 00000202) for this expedited study in February of 2012. The LSV group was 45 citizens who participated in two training cohorts, all of whom were parents of students. The survey 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 instrument included 50 items including thirty 5-point Likert items with a response scale *strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5)*, 10 Yes/No items, and three multiple-choice items pertaining to the knowledge, relationship, and action domains.

To the Knowledge Domain, respondents self-reported their level of agreement to whether LSV has significantly improved their knowledge of

1. The 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 to the statement, “because of relationship-building opportunities made available in LSV I am more likely to...”

1. Contact a friend or acquaintance about an education-related issue,
2. Be contacted by friends and acquaintances about an education-related issue,
3. Contact the superintendent about an education-related issue,
4. Contact a board member about an education-related issue, and
5. 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. Wrote about a school district-related issue on a blog, Facebook, Twitter or another social media site,
3. Submitted a letter to the editor of a local newspaper concerning a school district-related issue,
4. Got involved in an education-related state legislative initiative,
5. Communicated with the superintendent or a 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. Supported the campaign of a candidate based, in part, on education-related issues.

The study also collected data from face-to-face interviews with LSV participants who volunteered to share their perspectives of their training experiences. Using cognitive interview techniques (Beatty & Willis, 2007), the researcher used probes and follow-up questions to enable the interviewees to elaborate on experiences, concepts, and reflections that arose spontaneously.

Finally, the study included 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 from a variety of sources were categorized to indicate LSV reach, influence and recognition: PTO groups, school district, legislature, community, and a newly formed parent advocacy group known as Grassroots St. Vrain (GSV). The archival documents were reviewed for references to or mentions of LSV.

FINDINGS

Knowledge LSV participants gained from the training

A primary objective of the LSV training was to empower citizens with detailed knowledge (*know-how*) about school district operations. The strategy was based, in part, on Rosell and Gantwerk (2010) who emphasized the need for citizens to be given an opportunity to understand the larger context of institutional dynamics and dialogue with people from different backgrounds. The LSV training curriculum included knowledge pertaining to organizational structure, instructional programs, policies and practices, governance, and school finance as detailed earlier in this paper. For the knowledge domain, participants (n = 27, 64%) were asked to self-report whether their knowledge of each of five areas of the school district improved as a result of the LSV training. In particular, school funding, district policies and practices, instructional programming, and the district's organizational culture indicated high levels of improvement. For example, the statement "LSV has significantly improved my knowledge of the school district's overall policies and practices," had the highest level of agreement with 97% responding either strongly agree or agree (M = 1.63). By increasing the participant's knowledge of state education funding, the district's organizational structure and its policies and procedures, citizens acquire the larger context needed to develop informed viewpoints about school-related business and be prepared to participate.

Table 1
Knowledge Domain Response Totals for Strongly Agree and Agree

LSV has significantly improved my knowledge of:

The school district's overall policies and practices	97%
The school district's organizational structure	93%
The State of Colorado's role in school funding	92%
The school district's instructional programs	85%
The school board's role in the school district	80%

In face-to-face interviews (n = 10), participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of learning about school finance. In particular, participants referred to the presentations by Natalie Mullis, Chief Economist for the State of Colorado. One parent referred to this meeting as a "highlight" of the training experience. Interviewee 9 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 (Interviewee 1).

Echoing this sentiment, another (Interviewee 10) 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” (Interviewee 6). 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” (Interviewee 11). Another parent described the bigger picture

...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 (Interviewee 1).

When discussing the various types of knowledge in the LSV training, two participants, 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.” Formerly

...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 (Interviewee 6).

A similar view was expressed by another parent who described an improved sense of insight into what decisions could be made by the principal at the school level that determined important issues such as class

size. Prior to the LSV training, parents were told by a principal that unpopular decisions were from 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 (Interviewee 11).

Relationships LSV Participants Gained From the Training

Another primary objective of the LSV training was to revitalize the relationship of education leaders with the public (Shirley, 1997) by providing opportunities to meet and develop relationships with leaders regarding education-related issues. By cultivating personal relationships among participants and education leaders, the purpose was that participants would be more likely to contact or otherwise engage when they have questions and concerns. The acquisition of these key relationships is *know-who*, which includes those identified as presenters. Over the course of the 8 month training program, participants had the opportunity to meet with the superintendent and other members of his leadership team at multiple training sessions, further deepening relationships.

In the relationship domain, respondents (n = 27) were asked to evaluate their likelihood to engage with others on the topic of education as a result of relationship building opportunities provided through the LSV training. This highest level of agreement was "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% strongly agreed or agreed (M = 1.81). 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 from 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" (Interviewee 4). 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".

Table 2

Relationship Domain Response Totals for Strongly Agree and Agree

Because relationship building opportunities made available to me in LSV:

I am more likely to contact a friend or an acquaintance about an education-related issue	82%
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Friends and acquaintances are more likely to contact me about an education-related issue	81%
I am more likely to contact a board member about an education-related issue	81%
I am more likely to contact the superintendent about an education-related issue	77%
I am more likely to contact a state legislator about an education-related issue	67%

Superintendent Don Haddad routinely attended the LSV sessions, 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,” stated Interviewee 3. To explain the relevance of trust, 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 (Interviewee 1).

Recognizing interacting with leaders, another 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 (Interviewee 6).

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) strongly agreed or agreed. Interviewees also made reference to access to the school board president.

Actions by LSV participants after the training

The action domain items (yes/no/unsure) were intended to investigate respondents’ involvement in a variety of education-related activities after their LSV training. The two items resulting in the highest number of yes actions were “ After getting involved in LSV I have volunteered my time at a school or district event,” to which 100% marked yes, and “...I have asked another parent or community member to participate in a school or district-related initiative,” with 92% yes.

Table 3
Action Domain: “Yes” Responses

After getting involved in LSV, I have done these things:

Volunteered my time at a school or district event	100%
Asked another parent or community member to participate in a school or district-related initiative	92%
Shared knowledge about school district-related information with my school PTO	88%
Was involved in an education-related state legislative initiative	88%
Made a financial contribution to a school or district initiative	85%
Communicated with the superintendent or member of the board of education about an education-related issue	81%
Supported the campaign of a candidate based in part on education-related issues.	73%
Written about a school district-related issue on a blog, Facebook, Twitter, or another social media site	69%
Asked another parent or community member to make a financial contribution to a school or district-related initiative	42%
Submitted a letter to the editor to a local newspaper concerning a school district-related issue	27%

Several of the interviewees (n = 10) mentioned sharing information learned in LSV with friends and PTO members at their children’s schools. Two participants disclosed that specific information from LSV was shared in school newsletters to parents. Another parent talked about informal conversations with parents at school, with colleagues at work, and with members of the school board. He described how the nature of his participation in conversations about education had changed. Before participating in LSV, “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” (Interviewee 9). 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” (Interviewee 10).

Reach of Secondary Effects From the LSV Training

The LSV training reached beyond the experience of the individual participants as evidenced in a variety of archival data documenting the presence and/or influence of activities related to LSV in the greater community. For example, PTO meeting minutes began to add reports from LSV participants who acted as liaisons bringing questions and comments from the PTO back to LSV and vice versa. In addition, formal presentations told the LSV training story at the invitation 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 conference attendees.

IMPLICATIONS

Subsequent to the movements to professionalize teachers and administrators and centralize the nation's school districts, trained educators were thought to be more qualified than the public to make school-related decisions (Katz, 1975). Professionals lacked understanding "about broader social and ethical implications of their occupations" (Fischer, 2009, p. 22) and assumed a "right to self-governance on the grounds that other groups are not qualified to judge either their knowledge and skills nor the exercise of their professional judgment." Educators, specifically, were not inclined to engage with parents and other non-professionals because "...they had worked hard to achieve a level of expertise and know what is best for all children in the district" (Gurke, 2008, p. 1). Unfortunately, excluding the public from school business has led to an alienation between citizens and their schools. Findings from the LSV study suggest that when district leaders provide civic knowledge through "know how" and "know who," citizens attend, participate, and feel empowered to resume their role as active participants in problem solving and decision making. Reflecting on her experience and general confidence from the training, one participant said

I think that LSV has given me more confidence to assert myself and to advocate for the things that I believe in. I don't want to say necessarily it's just for SVVSD [St. Vrain Valley Schools], but for anything I would like to do (Interviewee 12).

After decades of decreasing public participation in schools, the time has come for education leaders to proactively engage and empower stakeholders to become more informed, effective participants in school district business. The LSV training is a model for increasing stakeholder knowledge, building rapport with school leaders, and raising the district's capacity for public participation. Now going into its sixth year, the number of attendees grows affirming the continuing and sustained interest and willingness of citizens to be informed and participate in decision making. District leaders should support and lead initiatives such as LSV because they can be the most reliable and consistent source of information and encouragement to participants. Fischer (2009) states, "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 and community—leaders to whom citizens can turn

for accurate information, reciprocity, and rapport—are the ingredient for success.

SUMMARY

By raising its capacity for public participation through training that increases civic knowledge, officials with St. Vrain Valley Schools, parents, and other community stakeholders have successfully deliberated numerous complex and controversial issues. These deliberations separate from LSV meet the challenges of school boundary changes, budget rescissions, school closures, the implementation of K-8 schools, and (in the wake of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut) a community dialogue on school safety with sensitive topics like gun control, armed school personnel, and the conflicting interests of student safety versus excessively restrictive school campus environments. While these issue deliberations do not result in unanimous support for one particular outcome, the rich exchange of concerns and interests results in a deeper understanding of related policies and practices and a deeper appreciation for the diversity of values and beliefs among community members that inform decisions.

During the period of years in which the superintendent has actively sought to increase district and stakeholder capacity for public participation and supported LSV, a number of key statistical indicators on district performance have shown positive improvements: overall improvement on students' standardized test scores, a steadily increasing graduation rate, a steadily decreasing achievement gap, and a steadily decreasing occurrences of student suspensions and expulsions all at a time of increasing enrollments. Additionally, during this period, three of the last four directors elected to serve on board of education are parents who previously participated in the Leadership St. Vrain training.

In response to lagging engagement in public schools by citizens, education leaders must evaluate the inclusiveness of their decision making practices and put aside fears of being challenged. They must help stakeholders acquire the knowledge and relationships needed to facilitate greater and more consistent engagement in district business. Once stakeholders are welcomed back into the role of valued participants in district affairs, they will provide valuable insights into seemingly routine issues like developing the best possible boundary scenarios in collaboration or how to best deal with a venerated but dangerously out-dated school. Through a training program like Leadership St. Vrain, school leaders can systematically raise their district's capacity for effective stakeholder participation in the shared and increasingly complex problems faced by their school districts and communities.

The public entrusts their youth, their tax dollars, and their communities' future to the schools. Stakeholder participation and deliberation will assure the renewal of the public's trust in school leaders, replacing polarized perspectives and purely self-interested agendas, with a growing commitment to the common good.

While the number of individuals participating in this study is small (N = 27) and its findings are not definitive,

LSV will begin its sixth parent training program in the fall of 2014. Since its launch in 2009, LSV participants' responses have continued to be positive and a number of participants have become civically engaged in education. Other school districts around the state have launched similar initiatives. To more thoroughly assess program impact, the authors will undertake a follow up study in the summer of 2014, comparing the outcomes of the parent training programs of four public school districts.

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APPENDIX

MEETING 1	MEET AND GREET
Presenters: - parent leader - superintendent - board president - leadership team	Make initial introductions among the participants, the district personnel, and the LSV parent who helps lead the program and is a resource to participants and the district throughout the year. An overview of the training curriculum and an opportunity for participants to ask questions about the format and share their interests in the program.
	TYPICAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS
	- Can I bring a friend with me to the next meeting? - Can I participate if I cannot attend every meeting? - Who can I call if I have questions or have to cancel at the last minute? - What topics will we discuss at the meetings? - Can I participate if my kids attend a charter school? - Will the program include committees, like a special education committee I can join to fix some problems I see? - Can I participate if I work for the school district part-time?

MEETING 2	DISTRICT OVERVIEW, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (I)
Presenters: - parent leader - superintendent - asst. superintendents - public participation trainer	Provide a big picture view of the school district. This includes the strategic plan, the size, and demographics of the district including feeder systems, growth projections and implications for student funding, and other infrastructure-related topics. An introduction to the concept of public participation and how communities, and school districts in particular, can benefit when a growing number of stakeholders understand the value of deliberative problem solving. The individual who has presented this information has been Martin Carcasson, Ph.D., professor in the Department of Communications and director of the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University.
	TYPICAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS Administration - How does the superintendent spend most of his workday? - How does the superintendent’s work differ from the board of education? - Who should I speak with when I have an issue with a teacher? - Can I contact the area assistant superintendent when I have an issue with a teacher or the school principal? - How is the job of an area assistant superintendent different from the superintendent? - My principal said the district office wouldn’t fund any paraprofessionals to help in the classroom. Is that true? - How are principals evaluated and are parents ever asked about their performance? Planning - Has our school district become too big? - Would it benefit everyone if we split the district into two smaller districts? - How does student enrollment affect state funding? - How does the October student enrollment count work? - Why is enrollment growth good for our district? - What happens when the district’s enrollment grows but enrollment at my child’s school falls? - How does enrollment growth affect class size? - How much bigger is our district projected to grow? - Why is the district building bigger schools? Aren’t smaller schools better? Public participation - Is it realistic for people who are so different to agree on anything when it comes to schools? - At my school, it’s always the same parents who do the work. How can we get more people involved? - Do parent meetings about difficult issues always have to go on and on without any conclusion? That’s been my experience. - Our whole society seems divided by extreme positions. How do we get past this polarized dynamic?

<p>MEETING 3</p> <p>Presenters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - parent leader - superintendent - board president - mayor - city council members - state legislators - state board member 	<p>GOVERNANCE AND ELECTED OFFICIALS</p> <p>Inform participants of the distinct leadership roles of the superintendent, the board president, and the board of education directors, including basic information about office terms, meeting schedules, and how citizens can contact their board directors. The board president summarizes current board priorities and particular expectations it has of the superintendent.</p> <p>Other local and state elected officials are invited to share their roles and priorities with regard to the district and public education in general. These individuals are encouraged to share their beliefs about public education and explain policy positions they have taken. Participants have the opportunity to share concerns with the elected officials and ask them questions. Whenever possible, this meeting includes the locally elected representative on the State Board of Education.</p> <hr/> <p>TYPICAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS</p> <p>Board of Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How often does the Board meet? - Are board members paid for their service? - How many people serve on the board and do they represent a specific geographic area? - Can I call the board when I have a problem with my child’s school? - How much of the Board’s time is spent on budgeting? <p>Local elected officials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How does city council work impact the school district? - Do school board members and city council representatives work on projects together? <p>State legislators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What’s your role in state education funding? - When will the state stop cutting the education budget? - What’s your position on state education funding? - How can we get more legislators to support our schools? - What are you spending most of your time on at the legislature? <p>State Board of Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are you aware that the state’s school rating system is actually hurting enrollment at my child’s school? - Why are schools in wealthy districts so completely different from schools in economically disadvantaged districts?
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MEETING 4	SCHOOL FINANCE
Presenters: - parent leader - superintendent - chief financial officer - budget director - state budget official	Provide a general overview of school funding from local, state, and federal sources, related laws and policies including state constitutional requirements and amendments, summary of state education budget and a review of the district’s budget, and current financial position. For the past five years, State Economist Natalie Mullis has reviewed the state budgeting process. Included in her presentation are funding scenarios for the next fiscal year, including predictions for education funding.
	TYPICAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS District finances - What percentage of the district’s operating fund is spent on classroom instruction? On salaries? Comes from grants? - Does the district have a “rainy day fund” and, if so, how much money is there and what can it be used for? - How has school funding changed in the past 5 years? - How does our district’s financial status compare with neighboring districts? - Are teacher salaries in our district competitive? - How is our district’s financial position projected to change? - Are district administrators over paid and is our district administratively top-heavy? - What is the district’s bond rating? State finances - How does the state’s funding formula work for school districts? - How is PPR (per pupil funding) set and will it be changing next year? - How does Colorado’s TABOR (Tax Payer Bill of Rights) Amendment affect school funding? - What is the Gallagher Amendment and how does it impact education funding? - How does Colorado rank in terms of K-12 education funding?

MEETING 5	ADMINISTRATION AND LEADERSHIP TEAM
Presenters: - parent leader - superintendent - asst. superintendents - chief operations officer - chief finance officer	Provide detailed information about key administrative leadership roles and duties including priorities in principal supervision and school-level leadership activities. This meeting includes an in-depth presentation on operations and maintenance, including school buildings, construction projects, transportation services, and nutrition services among other services of the district. The chief financial officer provides additional information pertaining to standing capital bond obligations and local tax levies supporting the district.
	TYPICAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS Curriculum and student services - Why do some schools have an instructional focus and others do not? - What can parents at my school do to add a focus program in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM)? - What’s the difference between Honors and Advanced Placement-level classes? - How are schools funded for GT (Gifted and Talented) programming? - Do all schools have the same amount of resources and support for SPED (Special Education) programming? - How many hours of homework should my student have each night? - Is it true that the arts have been cut but funding for athletics has increased? Transportation - What’s the maximum amount of time a school bus route should take? - How much money does it cost to operate the district’s bus fleet? - Will our district begin charging parents for bus transportation? - Are school bus drivers trained and do they have background checks? - When are weather conditions unsafe for school buses to operate, and is it due to unsafe driving conditions for school buses that school is canceled? - How does the district handle misbehavior on the school bus? - Is there anything the district can do to reduce traffic around my child’s school? - Why don’t charter schools offer transportation? Buildings - Are all schools air-conditioned? - Are there new security features planned for our schools? - Do all schools have security cameras inside and outside the buildings? - How energy efficient are school buildings? - Does the district plan to close, renovate, or open new schools in the near future? - Do schools have recycling programs?

MEETING 6	SCHOOLS, CURRICULUM AND STUDENT SAFETY
Presenters: - parent leader - superintendent - instructional leaders - safety manager - chief of police	Review relationships between the district’s assistant superintendents and the school principals under their supervision. This includes expectations concerning school leadership, academic achievement, curriculum, co- and extracurricular activities, communication, student discipline, safety and security, and community relations. Participants learn how to obtain valuable information concerning school performance and how to effectively raise concerns about students, the district, and their child’s school, principal, teacher, or other staff. The District Safety Manager reviews policies and practices concerning student safety as well as a variety of building features and tools specifically designed to increase safety. The city Chief of Police details the department’s working relationship with the district and schools, including the district-wide school resource officer (SRO) program that stations trained, full-time police officers in secondary schools. The Chief of Police shares information about community policing and responds to questions about school safety, criminal behavior, and other police-related issues and concerns.
	TYPICAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS School safety - Are the schools adding more safety features? - Are we turning schools into fortresses? - Is the SRO in my child’s school a real cop and does she have a gun? - Who pays for the SRO program? - Who’s in charge if there’s a police emergency at the school? - What am I supposed to do as a parent if I get a text about a kid with a weapon in school? - What more can we do to make our schools safer? - Do the various police departments and sheriffs’ offices collaborate on school safety?

MEETING 7	INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT SERVICES
Presenters: - parent leader - superintendent - asst. supt. of learning services - director of special ed. - director of gifted and talented - director of arts and athletics	To inform of the academic curricula opportunities including instructional focus programs, instructional techniques, teacher training/professional development opportunities, and expectations concerning classroom instruction and the learning environment. Other programs and services explained to participants include special education, gifted and talented, and co- and extracurricular programs in the performing arts, forensics, and athletics.
	TYPICAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS Learning services - How are class sizes determined? - How are student fees for classroom supplies determined and what happens if a family can't pay? - What is the district's policy with substitute teachers? Does anyone keep track of the number of times a class is left in the care of a substitute teacher? - How does open enrollment work in the district? - Do teachers routinely receive professional development opportunities? Special education - What is the Child Find program and how are children identified for special education services? - Do parents have to pay for additional special education services? - Do charter schools offer special education services? - What is an Individualized Learning Plan (IEP) and how are they implemented and managed? - What are the state and federal laws that govern special education services? Gifted and talented - What are the requirements for gifted and talented classification? - Do all schools have the same resources for gifted and talented services? Athletics, arts and co-curricular activities - Who determines eligibility requirements for athletics? - Why should schools continue to offer sports? - Are all coaches also teachers? - How many times a week should coaches hold practice and for how long? - Why are the athletic fees so high and will they ever come down? - Has funding for the performing arts been cut in our district? - Has funding for art been cut?

MEETING 8	TECHNOLOGY, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (II)
Presenters: - parent leader - superintendent - chief information officer - public participation trainer	<p>Explain and demonstrate the district’s technology infrastructure and the variety of tools to enhance classroom instruction. Also explained are the policies and practices relative to student expectations and safety in the online environment.</p> <p>The final meeting of the training includes a second presentation by Dr. Martin Carcasson on public deliberation applications in the community and especially in a public school environment. The presentation is specifically designed to provide participants a working knowledge of collaborative problem solving and decision making to assist them with future engagement and/or leadership commitments they may choose to pursue--parent teacher organizations, school accountability committees, the school board, or other local and state held public offices.</p>
	<p>TYPICAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS</p> <p>Explain and demonstrate the district’s technology infrastructure and the variety of tools to enhance classroom instruction. Also explained are the policies and practices relative to student expectations and safety in the online environment.</p> <p>To the topic of public deliberation, participants ask how regular people can deal with wicked problems and the role school district officials should play in facilitating meaningful processes. Participants ask about the role of education experts and whether parents with dramatically different belief systems can realistically be expected to work together and have productive conversations. Another common topic is where parents can learn more about deliberative problem solving.</p>