

P u b l i c E n g a g e m e n t P l a n

District of Columbia Public Education Finance Reform Commission

PREPARED BY:

Collaborative Communications Group
1029 Vermont Avenue NW, Ninth Floor
Washington, DC 20005



COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

Table of Contents

District of Columbia Public Education Finance Reform Commission	3
Underlying Basis and Assumptions for Public Engagement	4
Core Values for the Practice of Public Participation	4
Relevant Elements of the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation and Recommendations	5
Public Engagement in the District	5
Public Engagement Strategies Defined	6
Implementing the Community Engagement Plan	9
Final Considerations on Public Engagement	9

District of Columbia Public Education Finance Reform Commission

In July 2010, the DC City Council authorized the creation of a Public Education Reform Commission to produce and deliver to the Mayor and the City Council an “equity report” along with recommendations for improvement and reform to the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF). Of particular concern is the uniformity of funding between DC public schools and public charter schools, as well as the funding levels needed by all schools to meet academic standards, the fiscal ability of the DC government to provide needed funding, and ways to present information and calculations related to the UPSFF so that they are clear and understandable to policy makers, program administrators, and the general public.

The Commission’s work is launched against a backdrop of public and professional concern about the legality and equitable distribution of public school funding across DC public schools and public charter schools over the past several years. Similarly, many experts have raised questions about the equity of the allocation of facilities funding and capital resources, as well as the equity and adequacy of funding for students with particular educational needs, including special education students, English language learners, and those with other needs that require additional resources within and outside the classroom. In the current budget environment, policy makers have questioned the affordability of desired education funding levels.

Given this context, the Commission will need to calculate and compare patterns of expenditure for a variety of categories of students and schools citywide and determine whether current funding allocations conform to the UPSFF and the provisions of the DC School Reform Act of 1996, which guarantees equal funding for all students citywide. Of particular significance will be the Commission’s definitions of “equity,” “adequacy,” “affordability,” and “transparency” and the criteria it establishes for assessing patterns of spending against these desired outcomes. As in other states across the nation, the Commission will need to consider whether to recommend changes to the existing law and formula for education funding.

Communications Collaborative Group (Collaborative) in partnership with The Finance Project (TFP) was selected through a competitive bid process to deliver the first phase of the Commission’s work including this draft of a public engagement plan for the Commission. Given the many stakeholders impacted and engaged in these important school finance questions, how the Commission engages the public in its work is particularly important to formulating robust recommendations supported by District stakeholders.

Underlying Basis and Assumptions for Public Engagement

Collaborative—a leader in convening learning communities, engaging communities and supporting knowledge management frameworks—has extensive experience, skills and infrastructure to bring the right supports at the right time and facilitate conversations that advance the work of improving systems of public education. As a neutral convener, Collaborative has a track record of creating safe spaces to connect people, share information and move ideas to action—whether in person or virtually via online communities.

This experience paired with the best practices articulated by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) that were developed with broad international input to identify core values for public engagement that cross national, cultural, and religious boundaries, served as the basis for formulating this draft plan for the Commission.

Core Values for the Practice of Public Participation

- A) Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
- B) Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
- C) Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
- D) Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
- E) Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
- F) Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
- G) Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

Given these underlying values and assumptions, as well as the needs identified in the Request for Quotes (RFQ) from the Deputy Mayor's Office for Education and the Office of Contracting and Procurement, Collaborative recommends a range of strategies that align with the relevant elements of the Spectrum of Public Participation also developed by IAP2.¹ Those recommendations are detailed in the chart, below.

¹ Spectrum of Public Participation. Accessed at: http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/IAP2%20Spectrum_vertical.pdf (Last accessed: 9/29/11).

Relevant Elements of the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation and Recommendations

Level of Public Impact 

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate
Public Participation Goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.
Promise to the Public	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspiration and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate you advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible
Recommended Strategies for the Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collateral materials • Commission Website • Webcasts/Airing of Meeting on NewsChannel8 • Audio recordings • Transcribed and translated meeting minutes • Facebook page • Twitter account 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings • Email blast updates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage community/subject-matter experts as advisors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DCPEFRC Commission • Consensus-building • Participatory decision-making

NOTE: Items in green are required pursuant to the RFQ.

Public Engagement in the District

Understanding that every community has an important history and civic identity to consider when engaging stakeholders, it was also important that Collaborative situate these strategies in the context of the DC. As

illustrated in the public comments in the first Commission meeting on September 27, 2011, DC has a history of division and a perception of inequality felt between the DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools. As stated in the Commission meeting, public meetings for residential and community input are held but sparsely attended. Oftentimes, meetings were held at inconvenient times or in locations perceived to be inaccessible. Furthermore, the content and issues were often not presented in ways for the community to be able to access and understand how their input can make a difference. Feelings that decisions are already made about issues publicly raised and the engagement process is more for show than a forum for authentic feedback and integration of ideas generated by DC residents has been a frequently voiced criticism and concern.

This opportunity, to engage the public on the education finance reform work of this Commission, is an opportunity to show DC residents that the Gray Administration and DC City Council view authentic public engagement as a critical aspect of policymaking and governing.

Public Engagement Strategies Defined

Given the District landscape and in looking to the strategies recommended in the previous chart, Collaborative has organized brief definitions of what each strategy should like relative to their engagement goal as the Commission employs these strategies in their work. It is important to note that these are definitions of each individual strategy taking into consideration what is known about public engagement in DC. How all of these strategies come together to be implemented as a comprehensive plan follows in the “implementation” section, below.

Strategies to Inform

- **Collateral Materials:** Printed informational materials can include fact sheets on the issues presented, issue papers and progress reports. They should be visually interesting but still reader-friendly. In papers and progress reports, be sure to explain the public role and how public comments have affected project decisions. Q&A format works well. Templates and samples created in Phase I of the staffing for the Commission will be included in transitional materials.
- **Commission Web site:** The Web site for the Commission should be the information repository for all Commission materials made available to the public. Links to relevant materials and opportunities for the public to reach out directly to the Commission to provide input should also be built into the site.
- **Webcast/NewsChannel8:** Where technology and budget allows, a webcast/video of the Commission meetings should be made available on the Commission website and/or NewsChannel8.
- **Audio Recordings:** In addition to webcasts, audio recordings should also be made available and posted to the Commission website and social media platforms.
- **Transcription & Translation Services:** Given that over 15% of DC residents speak a language other than English, the Commission should make a good faith effort to work with the Mayor’s Constituent Offices (Office of Latino Affairs, Office of Asian Pacific Islander Affairs, and Office of African Affairs) to ensure translation and interpretation be provided, where requested. Additional support could be secured from the Multicultural Community Service’s interpreter bank to ensure that transcriptions can also be available to non-English speaking residents.
- **Social Media:** A Facebook page “DC Public Education Finance Reform Commission” and Twitter account “@DCPEFRC” have been established for the Commission as free forums where the Commission can share information and connect/engage with the public online. Administrative access will be provided in the transitional materials for Phase II.

Strategies to Consult

- **Public Meetings with Public Comment:** All Commission meetings will be held as public meetings where content and issues are publicly deliberated and time is devoted for the public to ask questions and give comments. Meetings should be set up to be as welcoming and receptive as possible to ideas and opinions and to increase interaction between the Commission, the public and staff. The Commission should consider holding its meetings at various DCPS and public charter schools throughout the city in order to provide access to a various neighborhoods. Schools should be selected with careful consideration given to access to transportation, geographic diversity and balanced between DCPS and public charters.

Given our experience with engagement in the education context and in DC, specifically, there is tremendous value to hosting the Commission meetings at schools sites. Schools frequently serve as community hubs and are often the most welcoming venues for families to engage in issues of public concern. Given the issues that the Commission is considering, there is also significant symbolic value in making recommendations for schools and students in the venues where these recommendations will have their impact.

- **Focus Groups:** Where the Commission finds it necessary, focus groups could be convened to gain direct public input on concrete issues that the Commission is exploring. These meetings should be facilitated by non-Commissioners and the selection of attendees should be diverse.
- **Surveys:** A variety of survey instruments should be utilized by the Commission to gain additional public insights on education finance reform. In phase I, Collaborative employed a post-meeting survey delivered electronically to attendees who requested to be added to a contact list. The survey sought feedback on the process and content of the first meeting. Given the limited timeframe and likely small budget to staff the Commission, it is recommended that the Commission continue to utilize free online survey tools, like Survey Monkey, to reach out to interested parties to regularly gather community input on both process and content.
- **Email Blasts/Updates:** Again, utilizing the initial public outreach list compiled by Collaborative, the Commission should continue to provide updates to the public via concise and simple email blasts. The public outreach list should be added to throughout the duration of the Commission's work to ensure that as many stakeholders are engaged as possible. The initial public outreach list is included in the transitional materials for phase II.

Strategies to Involve

- **Community/Subject Matter Expert Advisors:** A group of representative stakeholders/experts should be assembled to provide public input to the Commission. Successful advisory efforts are clear to define roles and responsibilities upfront, are forthcoming with information, use a consistently credible process, interview potential advisors before engaging them and use third-party facilitation. These advisors could be utilized in an informal/formal capacity to advise the Commission on specific subject-matter expertise and others could be advisors and partners to ensure that information about the work of the Commission and opportunities for public engagement is reaching a wide audience of stakeholders.
 - The charter school and DCPS communities are known for their strong civic engagement and community leadership. This public engagement plan envisions them in their rightful roles as hosts, gatekeepers and networkers that can connect their constituents to the education finance reform process. There are also a variety of youth-serving organizations and coalitions that have

constituencies of families and students who are invested in the outcomes of this process and its potential impacts on their education and schools.

- The Commission and staff will have to make case-by-case determinations about how to best employ advisory opinion based on the needs of the Commission in Phase II. The Commission and staff should be sure to make all advisory information public and transparent and seek a diversity of opinion. A preliminary list of advisors has been generated based on public and Commissioner feedback to the Phase I process. That list will be included in the Phase II materials.

Strategies to Collaborate

- **Consensus Building:** The Commission should seek to build consensus based on the input of stakeholders and experts. Consensus here is defined as general agreement. It is important that consensus be the product of a good-faith effort to meet the interests of all stakeholders. The key indicator of whether or not a consensus has been reached is that everyone agrees they can live with the final proposal; that is, after every effort has been made to meet any outstanding interests. Thus, consensus requires that someone frame a proposal after listening carefully to everyone's interests. Many believe that groups or assemblies should seek unanimity, but settle for general agreement that goes as far as possible toward meeting the interests of all stakeholders. It is absolutely crucial that this definition of success be clear at the outset.²
- **Participatory Decision Making:** Participatory Decision Making (PDM) is most effective when a large number of stakeholders from different walks of life come together to make a decision that benefits everyone. In this case, everyone can be involved, from community-based organizations (CBOs) and government agencies to volunteers, experts and members of public. PDM can take many forms, running the gamut from informal suggestion systems to direct high involvement at the policy and administrative level. Consensus building is a form of PDM, as are collective, democratic, autocratic and delegation based on expertise processes. The Commission in its very existence represents PDM on behalf of the Mayor's office.³

Media Engagement Strategies

- **Utilize Commission Chair as Sole Commission Spokesperson:** Ed Lazere, Chair of the Commission should serve as the sole spokesperson to the media on issues related to the Commission.
- **Utilize the Deputy Mayor Office for Education as the Sole Spokesperson for the Contract:** The DME's office should field all questions about the contract related to staffing the Commission.
- **Consistent Messaging:** The Commission should develop with staff, key messages to communicate to the media and community. Messages should be short, direct, and target specific themes or phases of the project. Key messages eliminate the potential for confusion or misunderstandings about the Commission, its objectives, and the desired outcomes. Key messages should be developed by considering the important components and points that the Commission would like to convey to the public.

² Adapted from: Consensus Building Institute. Definition of consensus. Accessed at: <http://cbuilding.org/faq/what-do-we-mean-consensus> (Last accessed 11/29/11).

³ Somech as cited in Steinheider, B., Bayerl, P. S., & Wuestewald, T. (2006, June). *The Effects of Participative Management on Employee Commitment, Productivity, and Community Satisfaction in a Police Agency*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Dresden International Congress Centre, Dresden, Germany. Accessed from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p93097_index.html

- Develop a Media Outreach List: A list of key media contacts for press releases and meeting materials should be developed to enhance community outreach efforts. Bill Turque from the Washington Post has already written several blogs about the Commission's launch. Ethnic media such as Univision, Telemundo, El Pregonero and local television channel 8, can also broadcast and write articles to inform the broader public of Commission meetings as well.

Implementing the Community Engagement Plan

In Phase II of the Commission's work, an organization or organizations will be contracted to work with the Commission to implement the entirety of the recommended strategies outlined above. Collaborative recommends the following steps for implementation to ensure a robust engagement of the public in the formulation of the Commission's recommendations:

- 1) *Engage Community Stakeholders to Review the Public Engagement Plan.* The recommendations outlined here reflect best practice in public engagement, but advisors and stakeholders with significant experience on education finance reform in DC and with community engagement, locally, will provide valuable feedback to this plan to enhance its goals and outcomes. This also provides an opportunity for the Commission to begin to build relationships with an informal network of advisors to consult on other Commission matters.
- 2) *Develop Clear Roles and Expectations with the Commission on Receiving Input from and Messaging to the Public.* Given that many of the engagement techniques above involve communicating with and to the public, the staff and Commission should establish how to create and disburse communications to the public.
- 3) *Immediately Create a Timeline for Meetings and Deliverables.* To develop a culture of transparency and inclusiveness, a timeline detailing all meeting dates, locations, strategies and deliverables should be created and released early in the Phase II process.
- 4) *Ensure that all Commission Materials and Actions are Accessible.* Although the RFQ only requires that the Commission "post information to the internet", Collaborative recommends that the Commission and staff go beyond merely "posting" and create an interactive experience for the public that utilizes forms of social media and a webpage so that all of its materials have an independent, public repository from which the public can interact with the Commission and seek additional information. A Facebook page and Twitter account have already been created to aid in the implementation of this strategy.

Final Considerations About Public Engagement

Generally, it is important to keep in mind that public engagement is not a linear process. Rather, as the project evolves, the public engagement process will also evolve. The Commission will need to reevaluate the strategies, messages, outreach materials, and partners to ensure that the goals of the Commission and the Public are being met.

Specifically, it is important to note that the creation of the Commission is a highly responsive form of public engagement. The work of the Commission will be taken into consideration by the Mayor's office and DC City Council in formulating its budget priorities for Fiscal Year 2013 and could influence the state of public education in DC for years to come. Beyond this Commission, there will be other opportunities for the public at-large to engage in the work of education finance reform in the District of Columbia during Fiscal Year 2013 budget hearings and the pursuant public comment period.

Given the many avenues for the public to engage in this work, if acted upon, the recommendations herein should provide the Commission with a wealth of information from a wide swath of stakeholders in the field and community.