



The Juggling Act

*Short-term solutions vs. long-term goals
can be a tough balance for
school leaders, but talking helps*

Marty Jacobs

Balancing the big-picture vision for your district with the district's immediate demands is a challenge for school leaders. The short-term often wins out, much to the detriment of long-term strategic goals.

We hear that we need to be more proactive and less reactive, but how do we stop the cycle of reactivity? One answer is to make room for dialogue. As a professional facilitator, I had the opportunity to do just that with one of my clients, and the results were impressive.

More than a year ago, the Dresden School District in
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Hanover, N.H., hired me to help resolve an issue with community members over a high school sports field. Hanover High School is nestled in a quiet residential neighborhood. The field had been built the previous year. Although concern during construction was that the lights would be intrusive, it turned out that the noise during field use was the major neighborhood complaint.

The Hanover Planning Board had approved conditions of use when the field was completed, with the requirement that, after a year of use, the district would revisit those conditions. That deadline was about six months overdue by the

time I was hired.

Cafe Conversations

Before my first meeting with the district, I did some digging into the history of the project, speaking with the city's planning and zoning director. Also, the superintendent sent me background information, including a draft proposal for revisions to the existing conditions.

At our first meeting, I held up a copy of the draft and asked if it had been publicly distributed. The answer was no; it had only been circulated among a few people. Good, I thought, that is one hurdle we won't have to jump over.

I then asked if they were willing to put the draft aside for

a while. I explained that if we went into our first public discussion on this topic with a proposed set of conditions, the reaction was likely to be resistance. They agreed.

In the next weeks and months, we designed a process that engaged the district, the neighbors, and the parents who supported the athletic program in a community conversation. The first part of the process involved inviting concerned community members and those who were less concerned to participate in a Cafe Conversation (see sidebar). Four to five participants sat at small tables and discussed the following questions in three separate rounds:

- What's important to you about the use of the field?
- What opportunities or trade-offs are there for the com-

Ways to engage the public

You can use a variety of techniques to engage the public in issues ranging from school budgets to bond votes to strategic planning:

Focus groups

This approach involves a series of small group discussions of eight to 10 people around specific questions. Discussions are led by a professional facilitator, and the groups can be a cross section of the population or more homogeneous, but the ultimate goal is to talk with a representative sample of the population. Participants are personally invited to attend the group.

Cafe Conversations

Cafe Conversations was developed by The World Cafe Community (www.theworldcafe.com), a group dedicated to this conversational process. It can be held for a few (12) or many (1,200 plus) participants and generally begins by stating the purpose and context of the gathering. Participants sit in groups of four to five and talk about questions that build upon each other. These are questions that are essential to participants' lives, their work, and their community. At the end, there is a final period of sharing insights and learning in a whole group conversation. A facilitator captures all the ideas, themes, insights, and learning.

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology (www.openspaceworld.org) is a model of community engagement that promotes cooperation and learning in a relaxed atmosphere. It is based on the following principles:

- Whoever comes are the right people. Those who are attracted to the same conversation are the people who can contribute the most to that conversation.
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could've. Focus on the present and not the past.
- Whenever it starts is the right time. Creativity has its own timeline.
- When it's over, it's over. Creativity must not be tied to artificial timeframes.

The model can be used for groups from five to 1,500 people and can be run for up to three days. The meeting focuses on a statement or question, and the group creates the agenda by choosing topics it is interested in leading a discussion about and a time and place for the conversation. The participants sign up for the conversations that interest them. Each conversation group selects a reporter, who then enters a discussion report into a computer, prints it out, and posts it electronically. The event ends with participants sharing insights.

Study Circles

Study Circles (www.studycircles.org) are a technique for creating public dialogue and community change. The process involves three distinct stages: organizing, dialogue, and action. The organizing stage involves setting goals, planning for action, and holding the kickoff meeting. The dialogue stage requires facilitating many small diverse groups of eight to 12 people. These groups meet in two-hour sessions to determine the nature of the problem, brainstorm approaches to change, and move from dialogue to action. The action stage begins with a forum of all Study Circle participants to share their experience and culminates with task forces or other implementation approaches.

Future Search Conference

A Future Search Conference (www.futuresearch.net) typically involves 60 to 70 people and takes place over three consecutive days. Participants review the past, explore the present, create ideal future scenarios, identify common ground, and make action plans. It generally takes three to six months of planning to implement a Future Search conference, and follow-up strategies need to be included in that planning.

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munity with the use of the field?

■ What assumptions do we need to test in thinking about how the field is or should be used?

Key ideas and concerns emerged for each question. Afterward, during a whole-group conversation, we identified common ground and discussed what was missing, what required more clarity, what we had learned, and what needed our immediate attention going forward.

Two weeks later we held another public forum where we reviewed and clarified areas of agreement. We also began to challenge or confirm assumptions by asking the following questions:

- On what data are these beliefs based?
- Is there any contrary evidence?
- Are you willing to consider other possibilities?

After testing assumptions, we began to brainstorm about how the existing conditions might be changed. Each person in the room had an opportunity to add one idea to the list. Participants then voted on their top five choices using colored dots.

At the end of this meeting, participants requested an informational meeting with the district to review the results of an upcoming sound study and statistics pertaining to use of the field and lights during the previous school year. That meeting took place without the need for a professional facilitator.

The final meeting in the process took place two weeks before the Hanover Planning Board was to hear the issue. The superintendent distributed a proposed draft of revisions to the existing conditions prior to the meeting (a much different one than I had seen at the beginning of the process). During the meeting, he presented his rationale for the changes, addressing both the needs of the district and the wishes of the neighbors. I then facilitated the discussion that followed. The transformation in the tenor of the conversation was amazing. As the superintendent framed it later, "I think, throughout the process, we didn't reach 100-percent agreement, but we did reach 100-percent respectful dialogue with each other." Two weeks later, the planning board gave its approval.

Keys to success

So what made this effort so successful? Here are the key factors:

A focus on long-term outcomes: Dresden's leaders recognized the need to commit the time and resources to developing a sustainable solution. During project planning, they were eager to resolve the issue before the start of the athletic programs in August. However, when they realized what was required to reach a satisfactory agreement, they let go of that urgency and instead emphasized the integrity of the process.

Using inquiry rather than advocacy: The most effective

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method for creating productive and constructive dialogue is to ask about another's perspective before explaining your own. The district's willingness to drop the initial set of revised conditions and opt for a process of inquiry was key to the entire project's success. The Cafe Conversation model humanized the issue. Neighbors and parents, some who had never met, discussed the issue earnestly and respectfully. It was a true testament to the power of listening and the need for being heard.

Testing assumptions: Assumptions about people's intent often can hinder us from solving problems. In fact, they can be downright destructive. When we engage in dialogue that puts a human face on the issue, it becomes easier to recognize and challenge our assumptions. After the first two meetings with Dresden officials, participants were beginning to shift their thinking. Even the slightest shift opens up new possibilities, and by the final meeting, participants were actually beginning to concede issues to each other.

Looking for common ground: In an issue as emotional as this one, where homeowners were discussing their quality of life, finding the areas of agreement was critical to forward progress. When it seemed like there was a giant chasm between perspectives, the common ground became the foundation to building a sustainable solution. As the thinking began to shift, common ground grew. It was crucial to focus on their agreements rather than on their disagreements.

A commitment to ongoing and broad communication: Most of my clients struggle with this area. Dresden did a great job of continuous communication by e-mail to the concerned parties in this issue. Materials were sent out before meetings to give everyone a chance to read and reflect on them. Moreover, the district has made a commitment to continue to communicate and follow up with the neighbors. As the superintendent reflected at the end of the first meeting, he realized he had been thinking about the district as an institution and not really part of the neighborhood. He wholeheartedly admitted to the participants that he recognized the school was not being a very good neighbor.

Was this an easy process? No. It took a lot of time and effort on the part of the district. Was it worth it? Absolutely. Dresden's ability to focus on the long term and to engage its community in a constructive, open, and respectful process will reap benefits for years. That's a balancing act worth achieving. ■

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