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The Value of Ordinary Expertise: Collaborative Public Involvement

As another school year rushes ahead, staff, students, parents, and other key stakeholder groups are taking up the invitation to have their say in shaping provincial/territorial and district level education policy and program decisions. As a means of inviting the public to join in the political process, commissions, forums, round tables, and consultations have become a standard of effective public governance; they have also, in the minds of some, stalled our progress in developing genuine forms of citizen engagement.

Studying the trends of private management in the latter half of the twentieth century, Weisbord argues that the corporate orientation toward decision-making has shifted from relying on experts to improve systems to recognizing that everyone needs to be involved in improving them.¹ Closer to home, and writing about the public sector, the Institute on Governance² and the Canada 2020 Working Group³ note a similar trend, in which the increasing complexity of changing outcomes in areas such as education or health has contributed to the emergence of a new paradigm favouring collaborative versus consultative public involvement.

Compared to other social and economic actors, governments at all levels are struggling to keep pace with this growing trend toward deeper public engagement. From the perspective of the Canada 2020 Working Group,⁴ for example, the public are still predominantly viewed as passive consumers of government policies and programs. This, in turn, often results in a limited view of public involvement as a means of gathering 'consumer' feedback (and buy-in) during development stages to enhance the eventual effectiveness of central decision-making.

It makes little sense to paint 'government' with a single brush. A number of local and provincial initiatives have broken the barriers of traditional provider-consumer (government-citizen) roles. However, most sectors, including education, still tend to rely on traditional consultation as the primary strategy for public engagement. In the education sector, this format allows the public to develop a general sense of current issues and the policy and program directions set to address them. It also allows them to provide input on local and provincial decisions at different points, when invited. Ultimately, however, the experts (to draw on Weisbord's terms) are left to make the final decisions on how educational systems and outcomes can be improved.

Traditional consultations tend not to challenge public sector organizations to reveal their own thinking about the issues at hand. Detailed accounts of factors influencing the consulting organization's decisions so far – why they favour one response over another, or the barriers they believe to be standing in the way of alternative points of view – rarely appear as agenda items. Time also limits the extent to which the public can learn the details of an issue and restricts their ability to see it from different vantage points. The public, unlike those hosting the consultation, rarely have the chance to "struggle with the same difficult choices facing decision makers."⁵

Solutions to complex issues – a term that applies to the majority of issues in education – require a much deeper public process and a commitment on the part of all levels of government to overcome the imbalance inherent in traditional consultations. As Lenihan and his colleagues point out, "sometimes governments need to sit down with others as equals."⁶ Collaborative public involvement entails knowledge, not just information sharing, as well as a shift in thinking about the value of the knowledge and wisdom that 'ordinary' citizens can contribute alongside conventional forms of expertise. It challenges boards, ministries, and even schools to think beyond traditional stakeholder groups to support the involvement of 'unattached' citizens who have a more distanced but equally important stake in the broader implications of decisions and their outcomes.

The most important point where collaborative involvement departs from traditional consultation is in recasting an expanded role for public voice. Improving parts of our education systems incrementally can be achieved by a few; transforming these systems to achieve the more complex goals of equity and excellence for all students requires many. Whether the public enters the conversation as students, parents, teachers, school administrators, or 'ordinary' citizens, the objective is the same: creating the space for everyone to define the parameters of the issues, to be actively involved in deliberating and deciding on solutions, and to determine the roles and responsibilities of each in turning well-thought-out decisions into meaningful action. |

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Notes

- 1 J. Bowers, "A Roadmap for Management and Its Use in Creating the Australian SME Sustainability Network," *FutureSearching*, March 2006. Available at http://www.futuresearch.net/network/invitation_to_join/32_spr06.pdf
- 2 Institute on Governance, *Rountable on the Democratic Deficit: Citizen Engagement and Consultation* (Ottawa, 2005). Available at www.iog.ca
- 3 Crossing Boundaries and Canada 2020 Working Group, *Progressive Governance for Canadians: What You Need to Know* (Ottawa, 2007). Available at www.crossingboundaries.ca
- 4 Ibid, 9.
- 5 J. Lukensmeyer and L. Hasselblad Torres, *Public Deliberation: A Manager's Guide to Citizen Engagement* (The IBM Center for The Business of Government, 2006). Available at www.businessofgovernment.org
- 6 Province of New Brunswick, *Listen, Learn and Act. A New Model for Public Engagement: The Final Report of the Public Engagement Initiative* (Fredericton, April 2008): 34.

