

Democracy in Action

School districts must function as democratic institutions to preserve American ideals of democracy

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School systems are important training grounds where both students and adults alike can learn and encourage the practice of civil discourse and where democratic values can be enacted, expressed, and achieved.



American democracy is in peril. Even as our society grows more racially and ethnically diverse, efforts to exclude marginalized groups from civic participation are ramping up. Income inequality has reached historic proportions, but rigid partisanship has impeded effective policy action. The weaponization of news and social media has weakened social ties and exacerbated political differences. And leaders have worked to undermine democratic norms and processes. What role should schools play in addressing this crisis?

We believe that present challenges require school systems to *function as democratic institutions*—to model and encourage the practice of civil discourse and democratic governance, to be places where democratic values can be enacted, expressed, and achieved. Schools are, in short, important training grounds where both students and adults alike learn and practice democracy together.

Just as we learn to do many things through action, so we learn to “do” democracy. The habits, practices, and behaviors that we use when dealing with one another in public, and the way we treat political rhetoric and procedural rules, reflect and shape democracy as we understand it. Through our shared activities and concerns, we reaffirm for one another what we collectively value and who we are as a public. Schools themselves, and the institutions that govern them, are places to develop and enact these habits and thus perpetuate the American ideals of democracy.

Many district leaders recognize the importance of the democratic purposes of public education. All too often, however, they seek to be “democratic” through activities that they regard as tangential to their core work: an open meeting to discuss a specific issue, for instance, or a one-time outreach to a particular group. Treating such one-off engagements as “democratic” can suggest that public participation in social institutions can and ought to be relatively rare or narrowly focused.

School boards remain an important site of local democratic governance. Finding ways to build inclusive and collaborative structures to engage with and inform school board and leadership decision-making is more important than ever.

Democracy in the context of public education

We define the meaning and purpose of democracy as peaceful self-governance in service of the public good as informed by electoral processes. As we consider how school districts can better enact democracy, we focus here on the values underlying democratic institutions. Below are three values that define how school districts should be promoting democratic aims in their processes and outcomes:

Fostering open and engaging democratic processes for school governance.

Honoring pluralism to cultivate inclusivity and promote equal membership.

Fostering a culture of inquiry and experimentation to “do” democracy.

These actions represent possible starting points for school districts to improve their functioning as democratic institutions.

Value 1: Fostering open and engaging democratic processes for school governance.

District leaders and governing bodies must be clear about how decisions are made, including the legal, constitutional, and ethical values that must be considered. Districts must follow a mix of federal and state mandates and regulations. They are constrained in resource decisions by state funding formulas and local labor contracts. Within those constraints, boards retain authority over budgets, staffing, pedagogy, cocurricular activities, and student discipline. Because school governance is complex, it requires careful planning to make it more accessible for parents and others to engage.

Aligned Action 1: Broadly and clearly communicate how school governance works, particularly from a legal standpoint.

Understanding the legal roles and rules of school district governance can be challenging. It is common, for instance, to hear the public demanding action by superintendents or school boards when those individuals have limited authority to make the desired change. Parents may want the district to reduce the amount of standardized testing, for instance, but such testing requirements often come from the state. Fostering local knowledge of how school governance works—i.e., where districts have discretion, how decisions are made, and who makes them—is important to cultivating a culture in which community members can efficiently and effectively use their voices.

To enable community members to more effectively participate in school governance, leaders can:

Outline the parameters of district responsibilities, relative to the state and the federal government.

Develop workshops and webinars to educate parents, students, and others on district operations, including the jurisdiction of the school board, the superintendent, and the school district office. Record those events and post them online.

Establish or reshape student and parent councils to mimic the governing structure of the district. Use these feedback instruments as experiential learning tools.

Aligned Action 2: Create a culture of meaningful democratic deliberation and input.

Peaceful and productive forms of public participation in schools happen when a district culture fosters inclusive conversations around goals, initiatives, and ongoing challenges. Districts should focus on establishing norms for taking issues to the public and creating opportunities for community members to engage. Additionally, district leaders will need to engage in targeted relationship building with diverse community groups, especially with historically marginalized populations.

To create a culture of inclusive participation among community members, leaders can:

Encourage deliberation and discussion by creating opportunities and forums for people to meet in smaller groups and not merely as a mass audience at board meetings.

Add student board representative(s). Student voice is essential.

Hold a listening tour at various district locations, ensuring those locations are welcoming, inclusive, accessible, and safe for all citizens.

Communicate the ways in which community members have been heard and the ways in which the district is responding to community input.

Value 2: Honoring pluralism to cultivate inclusivity and promote equal membership in the district.

Cultivating inclusivity and equality in a constitutional democracy requires respect both for individual rights and for the rich pluralistic array of cultural, political, religious and ethnic differences in any school or district. A pluralist society has traditionally been one in which different groups share and vie for government influence, and in which those differences are allowed to stand. This value is an expression of an idea embraced by most Americans—that each of us is an equal participant in our society, and that equal participation does not require any of us to be identical to everyone else. Pluralism suggests that respect for each other as free and equal citizens, despite our differences in beliefs and practices, rests at the core of shared governance.

Whatever our politics or our backgrounds, the school district is a place where we can affirm that there is room for everyone. That said, we have never fully lived up to this value, though we have come closer in certain historical moments than others. Moreover, living out this value remains profoundly difficult today, requiring bold and creative leadership.

Aligned Action 1: Encourage the participation of diverse stakeholders in decision-making.

There are clear ways to signal the centrality of pluralism, inclusivity, and equal membership. It also is important to take concrete steps to involve the people that decisions will affect in decision-making processes. To accomplish this, a community must first understand its constituents and the degree to which they are included.

To expand participation in meaningful decision-making, leaders can:

Develop an “equity of access” audit, which might consider whose perspectives are missing from decision-making, who is present at public meetings, and where constituents tend to share their ideas and concerns.

Develop a high-quality annual or biannual survey of students, school employees, parents, and community members to evaluate district and board performance.

Communicate the governance processes that are most important for public participation and input, detailing these dates on school calendars and schedules. Delineate public hearings on the school budget, strategic planning, or other key initiatives.

Vary event and meeting days, locations, times, formats (virtual or in-person), and provide interpreters to increase the likelihood of participation, particularly by those working second or third shifts and those with transportation or childcare constraints.

Aligned Action 2: Reduce barriers that segregate groups and create hierarchies within the district.

Because districts bring together different schools within a single community, they have a unique ability to lower barriers that separate groups. Separation is harmful both because it fosters inequality and prejudice, but also because it prevents us from learning from one another's different strengths. Many districts are already highly segregated due to residential segregation.

To reduce barriers that segregate groups, leaders can:

Promote integration through "push" policies, like student assignment, or "pull" policies like magnet schools.

Ensure equitable resourcing for schools, so that parents have less incentive to compete with one another to secure an adequate education for their children.

Ensure that parent-teacher organizations and other groups that exist alongside the district reflect the demographics of the district, especially if the PTO has the power to allocate funding to support certain school functions over others.

Value 3: Fostering a culture of inquiry and experimentation to "do" democracy.

Value 1 ensures that people can operate within the system, while Value 2 ensures that they have equal standing in the process. Value 3 puts those into action. Once a democratic community is brought together, its members must be able to collectively make decisions and determine how best to advance their shared aims. Recognizing that democracy is always in the making, communities should be encouraged to try new things and to embrace a spirit of innovation.

Aligned Action 1: Nurture relationships that will strengthen capacity for action and experimentation.

All the aligned actions in this article require some degree of capacity building. Yet districts may be more likely to possess expertise in communications, for instance, or school programming, than in research and development. For that work, districts can cultivate relationships and connections with universities, think tanks, state and national education offices, and other partners.

Organizational collaborators can help districts build capacity for educational innovation by bringing in specialized knowledge and resources to help district personnel develop new knowledge and skills. Sometimes, they can even provide financial, curricular, and other resources to support trying out new ideas. In short, they can assist a district in “doing” democracy through inquiry and experimentation.

To build capacity for experimentation, leaders can:

Create teams of community members who investigate and discover what has been tried elsewhere and worked.

Build partnerships with civic organizations that can help the district address challenges in specific areas.

Encourage innovation hubs where members imagine and create new approaches to governing and educating in their district.

Budget both funding and time for school personnel and community members to initiate and sustain experimentation.

Aligned Action 2: Experiment with diverse forms and formats of governance.

Many of the traditional modes of engaging with the public are rooted in just that: tradition. While willing to experiment with new curriculums and technologies, many school district leaders have done little experimentation with governance. However, the traditions of school governance systems were developed to serve a narrow range of stakeholders, often marginalizing racially “minoritized” and low-income people. Inclusive and democratic leadership requires reenvisioning democratic governance through innovation and experimentation, both requiring sufficient resources (time, funding, community partners) to execute well.

To promote more participatory forms of governance, leaders can:

Experiment with new forms of decision-making bodies, including school improvement councils that are vested with real and meaningful powers to experiment.

Build a culture of experimentation by signaling a willingness to try new proposals and welcome potential failure.

Embrace failures and false starts as an essential part of tinkering toward more democratic governance.

Practice democracy

Schools can play an important role in strengthening and sustaining democracy, and that role can go well beyond simply preparing students with knowledge and skills through the curriculum. Democracy is something that needs to be practiced, and the nation's public education system offers us core infrastructure for doing so. School districts are uniquely situated to bring a diverse set of people together and create collaborative dialogues about how to best serve young people, communities, and the public. In response to incredible challenges that will not soon fade, we encourage district leaders to respond by practicing democracy in deeper, more robust, and more sustainable ways.

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