

HOST, DON'T HOLD: RETHINKING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

How School Boards Can Listen With
Intention—and Turn Community Voice
Into Leadership Insight

Alabama School Boards Association

School board members don't have a listening problem. If anything, you may have the opposite problem. Everybody knows how to find you.

You hear from people at board meetings, in email, at ballgames, at church, in the grocery store—and sometimes when you'd really rather just buy your groceries.

The question isn't whether you're hearing from people. The question is whether what you're hearing is giving you information you can actually use to govern.

Today, I want to challenge some of the ways we traditionally think about community engagement and give you a framework for making that listening more intentional.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

- Community trust is fragile.
- Leadership expectations are higher.
- Communication mistakes are amplified.



FRAGILE

None of this has changed. What has changed for this audience is the seat you're sitting in.

School boards are governing in an environment where almost every issue can become public immediately. You're hearing from people with competing expectations, sometimes about emotionally charged issues, and you're doing that work publicly.

How you engage your community doesn't just shape relationships. It communicates something about how your board leads.



I'm guessing some version of this has been said in every district represented in this room.

And it should be.

But here's the question I want us to wrestle with today:

What does that actually mean?

Who do we want to hear from? About what? What are we trying to learn? What happens to what we hear?

Because saying we want to hear from the community and actually designing meaningful engagement are two different things.

WHO CHANGED?



Now, here's the part I think we sometimes miss. The people we're trying to engage have changed.

And I don't mean that as a criticism of anybody in this room—or of the parents and community members we're trying to reach.

We simply have generations of people who developed their expectations about communication in very different environments.

Some of us grew up in a world where, if an institution had something important to tell you, it told you. You got the letter. You read the newspaper. You attended the meeting. You waited for the information.

Many of today's parents came of age in a world where communication is much more immediate and much more interactive. They can ask a company a question online and expect an answer.

They can track a package from the warehouse to their front porch.

They can move money at 11 o'clock at night. They can watch a meeting without actually being in the room.

So when those same people interact with their school system, they don't suddenly leave all of those expectations at the door.

And that doesn't make them demanding or unreasonable.

It means the standard for what feels like access, responsiveness and engagement has changed.

And then something happened that accelerated all of it.



The pandemic was an extraordinary example of this.
Think about what happened almost overnight.
Parents who may never have attended a board meeting were watching livestreams.
They were reading reopening plans.

They were paying attention to decisions about schedules, masks, athletics, virtual learning, meals—you name it.
They were in Facebook groups.

They were texting one another. They were emailing. They were organizing. They were asking questions. Sometimes lots and lots and lots of questions.

And whether we enjoyed every minute of that engagement is a completely different presentation.

But here's what it showed us:
Parents weren't disengaged.
In fact, when something mattered deeply to them, they were extraordinarily engaged.

They simply weren't necessarily engaging on the terms we had traditionally created for them.

The pandemic didn't create that shift. It accelerated it.

And once people learned that they could access information differently, participate differently and

make their voices heard differently, we weren't going to put all of that back in the box when the school doors reopened.

SAME COMMUNITY. DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS.

We designed engagement around:
Come to us.

Families increasingly expect:
Meet me where I am.



And that's where we are today.

It's the same community.

They still care about their schools. They still care about their children. They still care about what happens with their tax dollars and the future of their community.

But the expectation of how they participate has changed.

For a long time, much of public engagement was designed around one basic proposition:

Come to us.

Come to the board meeting.

Come to the town hall.

Come to the listening session.

Come at 6:00 on Tuesday night and we'll give you an opportunity to speak.

And there's nothing inherently wrong with any of those things.

We still need them.

But increasingly, families are saying:

Meet me where I am.

Maybe that's online. Maybe it's at the football game. Maybe it's through a survey. Maybe it's a small-group conversation.

Maybe it's somewhere we haven't traditionally thought of as 'community engagement.'

And I don't think our response should be, 'Well, we gave you an opportunity to come.'
I think the leadership question is:

Did we create a meaningful opportunity for them to engage?
Because those are two different things.”

“And that's why I want us to rethink one of our default answers to community engagement:
the listening tour.
Not because listening tours are bad.
But because good intentions don't automatically equal good design.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE DEFAULT ANSWER

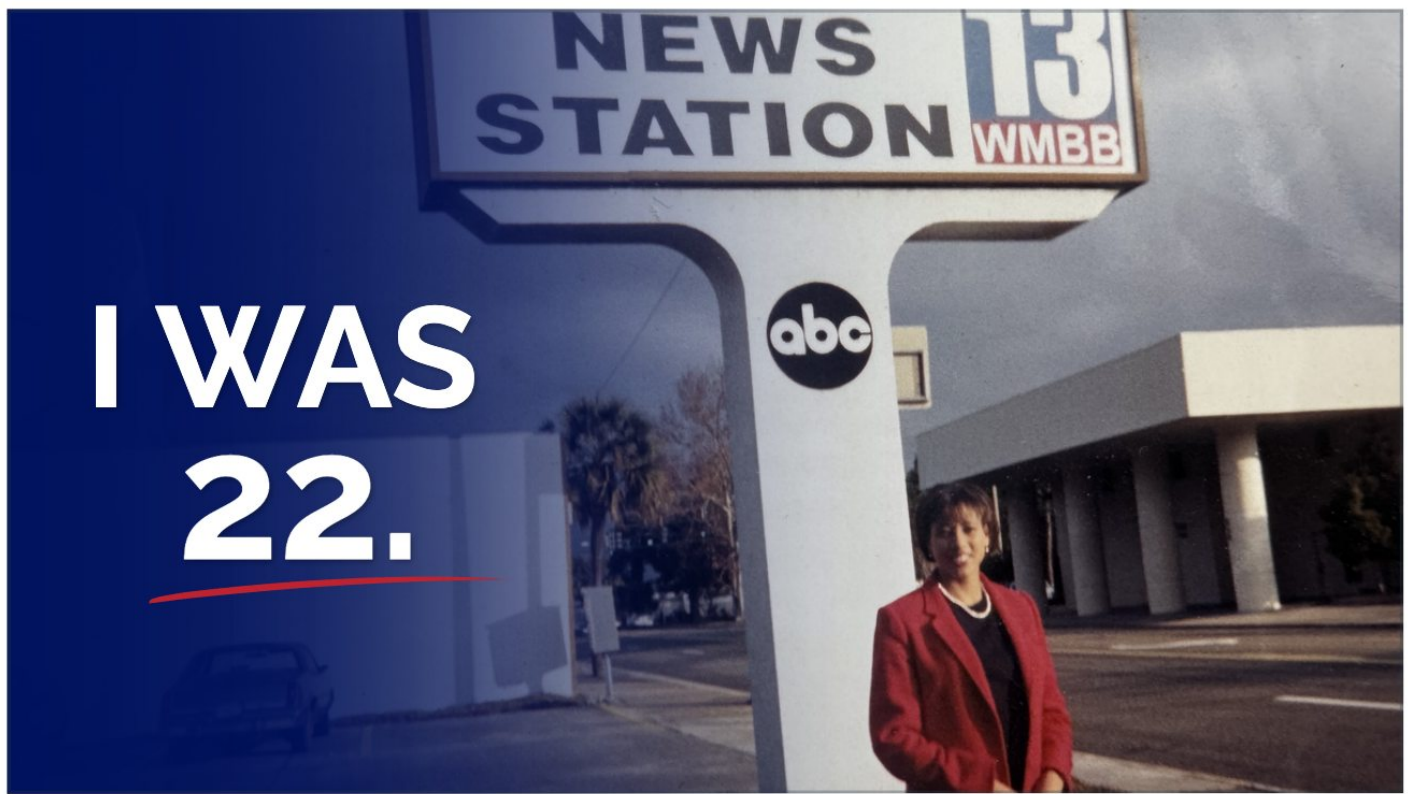
Good intentions $\neq$ good design



My problem isn't listening. My problem is assuming that calling something a listening tour automatically makes it meaningful engagement.

Who are you listening to? What are you trying to learn? Are you asking people comparable questions? What decision will the information inform? How are you going to make sense of everything you hear? And what happens afterward?

If we haven't thought through those questions, we may have designed a series of meetings—not necessarily a listening strategy.



That picture is me on my first day as a television reporter. I was 22 years old.

I was covering City Council meetings.

And I remember my very first one.



So, recall my first City Council meeting I ever covered and there was, umm, the agenda, the agenda items, and a lady who would come to the podium and speak very passionately about the first agenda item. I've got my camera trained on her. I am ready to go. She's giving me good content that I can use on the town clock news and after the end of her presentation.

The mayor said thank you very much, Mrs. Day, call the roll. And I thought that was so odd.

Agenda item 2. She is coming back to the podium. She still has more to say. She hasn't gotten it all out. She's gonna use all of her minutes that have been allotted and at the end of that thank you very much, Mrs. Day, call the roll.

And this went on for the entire meeting. Actually went on for years. She's probably still doing this.

This is the actual picture I found of Mrs. Day online, Leading a local civic group, so she's still giving them the business.

But as I reflect on that 25 years later, I think about how Mistake gave up her time to come and engage in the governance process, that she read the agendas ahead of time, that she had something to say, that she was prepared and everything was reduced to thank you very much, Mrs. Day, call the role. I can't imagine. how she felt about that interaction. Maybe it bothered her, maybe it didn't. But it does make me think about the optics of that interaction.

And that's reality for many people that make their way to government and and. Probably more so

for folks who don't normally come to governmental body meetings.

That's a big deal to step out in that way. There she was every week, probably just her and the City Council people and the mayor at most meetings, and we all have people in our communities that are the only ones that will come to a meeting and they speak on just about every topic. They too need to be engaged.

Mrs. Day met government where government asked her to meet it. And I'm not sure government ever really met Mrs. Day.



This is where my former journalist brain kicks in.

Reporters listen for a living. You gather perspectives. You ask questions. You talk to people who see the same issue very differently.

But there was always a constraint: I had a limited amount of airtime. So listening alone wasn't the job. I had to figure out what all of that information meant.

And who gets the microphone matters.

If I interview the three loudest people standing in front of me, that doesn't necessarily mean I've accurately represented the community.

The same thing can happen in stakeholder engagement. The people most willing to show up, speak first or speak loudest can begin to shape our perception of what 'everybody' thinks.

That's one of the risks of unstructured listening.

IMPORTANT CLARIFICATION

This is not an argument
against listening.

I want to be very clear about this.

I am not arguing against listening tours because listening is bad.

I'm arguing for better listening—listening designed to produce useful insight while still making people feel heard and respected.

WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

Unstructured participation can amplify:

- Dominant voices
- Repeated narratives
- Power imbalances
- False consensus

Smith, W.C., Benavot, A., 2019



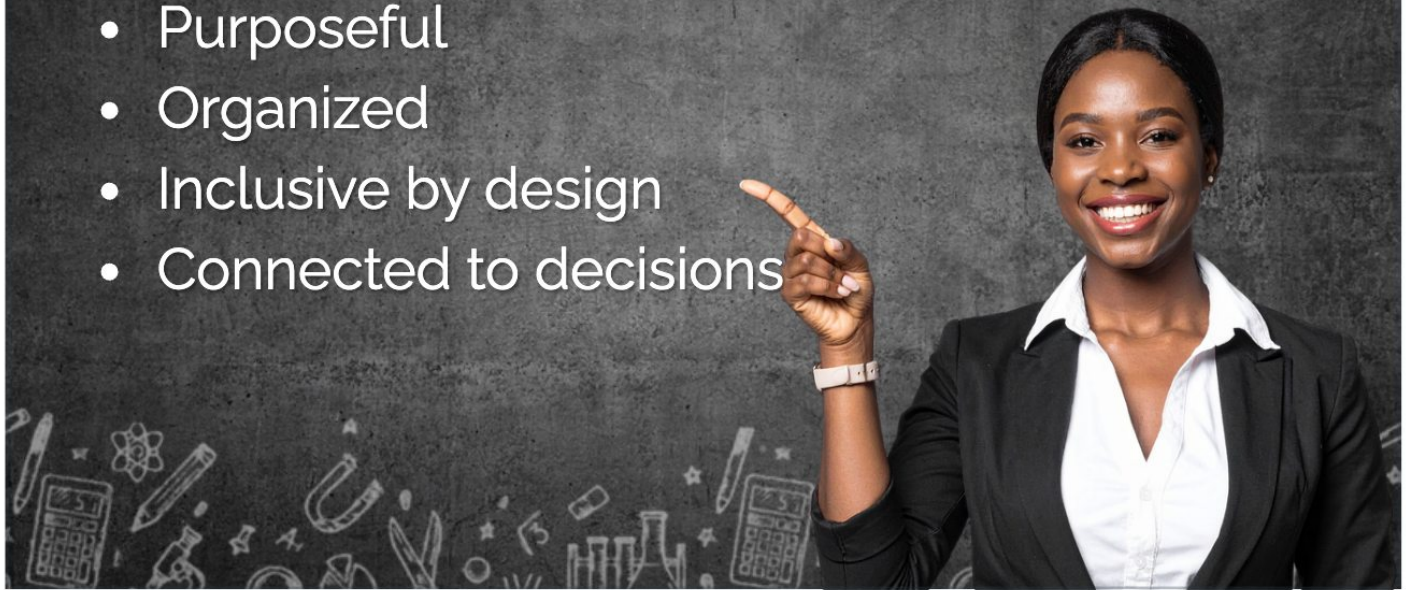
There's a reason to put structure around this.

Unstructured participation can amplify the voices that are already easiest to hear. We can hear the same narrative repeatedly and begin to interpret repetition as consensus.

Structure helps us hear more intentionally.

EFFECTIVE VOICE IS:

- Purposeful
- Organized
- Inclusive by design
- Connected to decisions

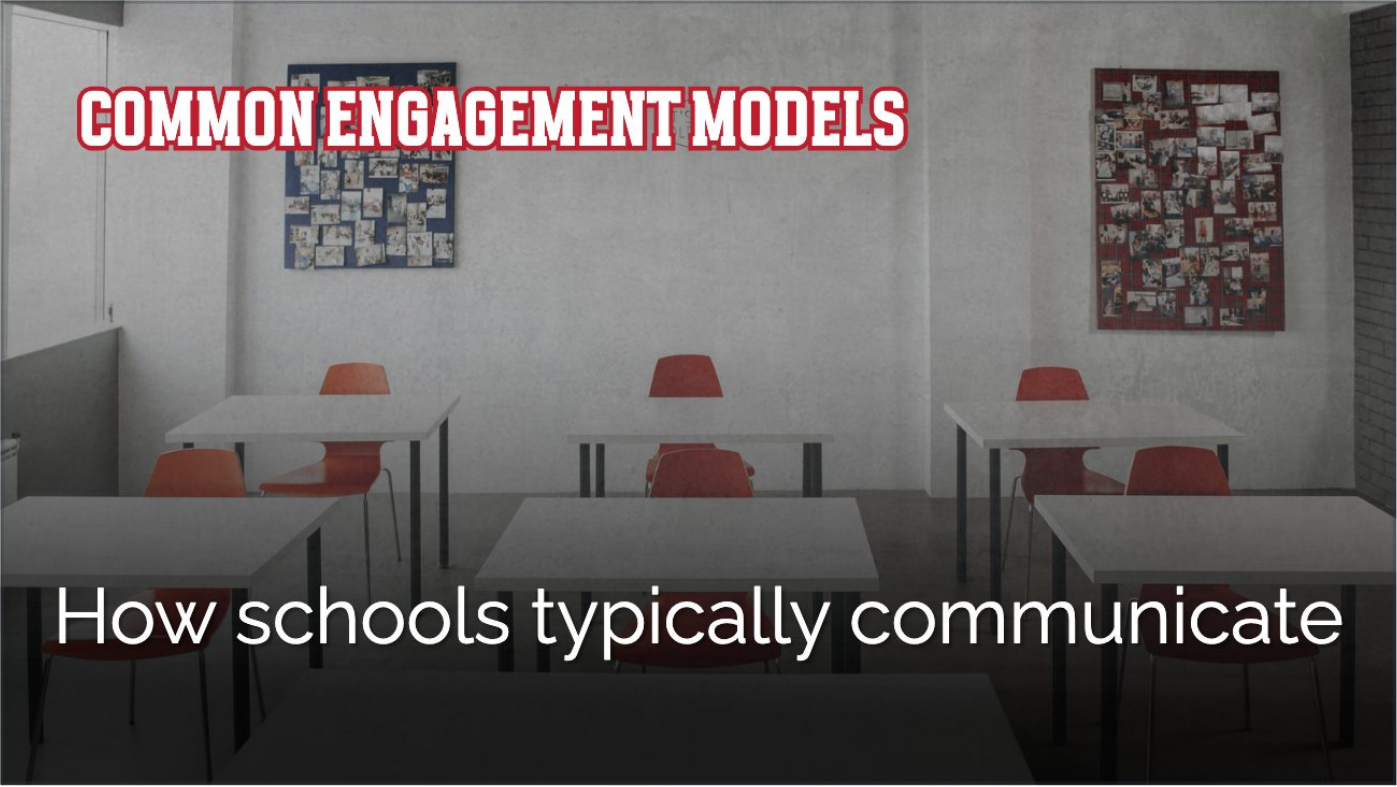


The alternative isn't to control what people say.

It's to design the process.

What are we trying to learn? Who needs to be represented? How will we collect input? And what will that input actually inform?

Structure doesn't make listening less authentic. It makes the information more useful.



COMMON ENGAGEMENT MODELS

How schools typically communicate

Most school systems move back and forth between two familiar models. Sometimes we're pushing information out. Other times we're opening the doors and inviting everybody to talk.

Both have a place.

The problem comes when we assume either one, by itself, is meaningful engagement.

ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION

Information goes out.
Feedback is minimal.

Examples:

- Presentations
- Press releases
- Board updates



Here's what we usually do. Sometimes we broadcast, like I'm doing to you right now.

UNSTRUCTURED TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

**Everyone talks.
No one synthesizes.**

Examples:

- Open-mic forums
- Listening tours
- Comment periods

Sometimes, we put out a microphone and invite anyone who wants to have their say.

THE REAL ISSUE

Two-way communication without structure **creates noise**, not clarity.



Neither is inherently bad. But two-way communication without structure can create noise instead of clarity.

THE MISSING MODEL

Structured Two-Way Communication



This is where HOST comes in.

It's not about less listening—it's about better listening.

THE HOST *Approach*

HOST meetings.
Don't just hold them.

Holding a meeting is passive.

Hosting requires intention, design, and accountability.

How It Works

- Honor the Time
- Open with Intention
- Structure the Conversation
- Translate Input into Insight

THE
HOST
Approach

“HOST is not a vibe. It’s a discipline.

These four tenets are what separate meaningful engagement from performative meetings.”

Honor the Time

“If people give you their time, you owe them clarity.”

Open with Intention

“People deserve to know why they’re in the room—and what decisions are on the table.”

Structure the Conversation

“Structure doesn’t silence voices. It creates space for the right voices to be heard.”

Translate Input into Insight

“Listening without synthesis isn’t leadership—it’s data hoarding. so you need to tell people what you learned.

HOLDING VS. HOSTING

Holding:

- Agenda-driven
- Transactional
- Output-focused

Hosting:

- Experience-designed
- Relational
- Outcome-focused



HOSTing shifts meetings from events to strategies.

WE COUNT WHAT'S EASY TO COUNT

6

Listen Sessions

327

Attendees

1,142

Survey Responses

So What?

So if I show you these numbers, what does it mean?
So what?

You know, I think one of our issues is that we count what's easy to count.

So if I were to reveal to you that six should have meant 6 listening sessions and 327 should have meant 327 people showed up.

And 1142, Tells me how many surveys were produced.

But the question remains, So what? What does it tell you?

I'm not saying these numbers don't matter. I'm saying they tell me what you did. They don't tell me what happened because you did it.

"I have been around schools for decades now and this is the first time I have ever participated in something like this."

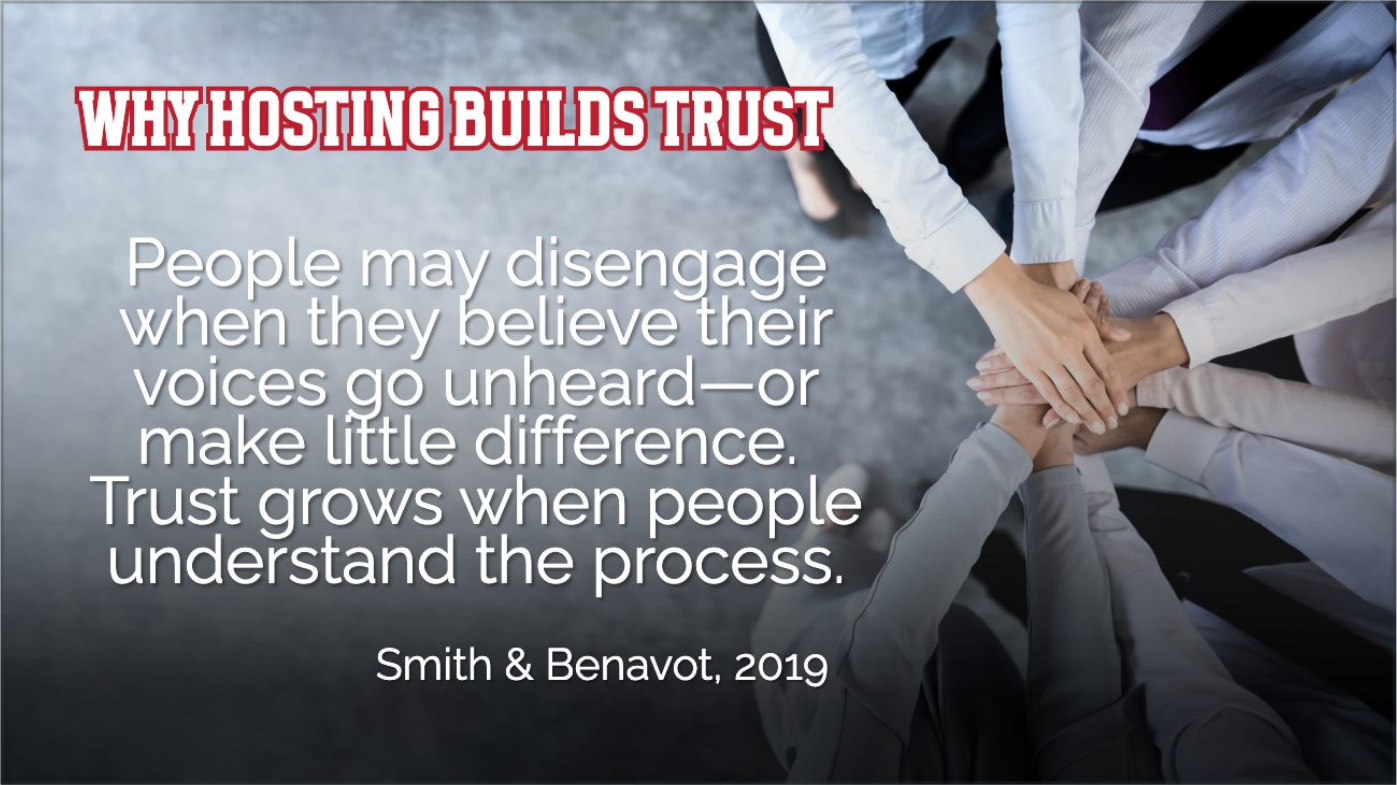


So I got the opportunity to put this to the test with umm, a school leader in another state. Where they went through the HOST process, they were coming off a very contentious board election that was hotly contested. They had a new superintendent who was hired during a continuous meeting between the board and the community.

Big issues in their community to consider. We had a winner and someone who lost the election in the same room.

And at the end, the person who lost the election came up to the Superintendent, said I around schools for decades now, and this is the first time I've ever participated in something like this. And they asked to do it again.

I sat in many, many. Community meetings and sometimes I've left exhausted. Just mentally drained from it. And in this case, the community was willing to mobilize around an issue.



WHY HOSTING BUILDS TRUST

People may disengage when they believe their voices go unheard—or make little difference. Trust grows when people understand the process.

Smith & Benavot, 2019

This is where the research on structured democratic voice becomes really important. Smith and Benavot found that people may disengage when they believe their voices go unheard or that their participation makes little difference.

And I think that second part matters enormously for us. We can hold the meeting. We can listen. We can take the notes.

But if people never understand what happened to what they shared, eventually they may conclude that participating doesn't matter.

HOSTing makes the process visible. It doesn't promise people they'll get the outcome they wanted. It shows them that their participation had a place in the process.



Experiential communication is the idea that how you design an experience communicates just as loudly as what you say.

Then tie it directly to education leadership:

“When a meeting is chaotic, unclear, or open-ended, it tells people something—even if you never say it out loud.”

It is the reason why people say: "this could have been an email"

Examples include:(not on the slide):

Open mic → “We don’t know what we’re listening for”

No follow-up → “This won’t matter”

Endless meetings → “Your time isn’t valuable”

ACCOUNTABILITY REALITY

School boards are accountable for
governance—not airtime.



Your responsibility is not to collect every opinion in your community.

And I want to be careful with that statement, because I'm not saying every voice doesn't matter.

I'm saying governance requires more than collecting voices.

Your job is to create legitimate opportunities for people to be heard, understand what you're hearing, identify what it means for the work you're responsible for—and then govern.

The amount of input you collect is not the measure of whether you engaged well. What you do with the insight matters.

THE LOUDEST VOICE IS STILL ONE VOICE

Intensity $\neq$ Prevalence.

This is one of the hardest things about serving on a school board.

Somebody emails every member of the board. They come to every meeting. They speak during public comment. They bring three friends. They're passionate. They're persistent.

And they may have an entirely legitimate concern.

But they're still one voice.

HOST asks us to distinguish between the intensity of a concern and the prevalence of a concern.

That's why structure matters. Who haven't we heard from? Are there patterns? Do other sources of information support what we're hearing?

We're not discounting the loud voice. We're putting it in context.

BEING HEARD $\neq$ GETTING YOUR WAY

"We heard you."
does not mean
"We will do what you asked."

"This may be one of the most important distinctions in community engagement.

People can be genuinely heard and still disagree with the decision.

Listening is not a promise of agreement.

What damages trust is inviting people into a process, taking their time and their stories, and then allowing everything to disappear into a black hole.

Close the loop.

Here's what we heard.

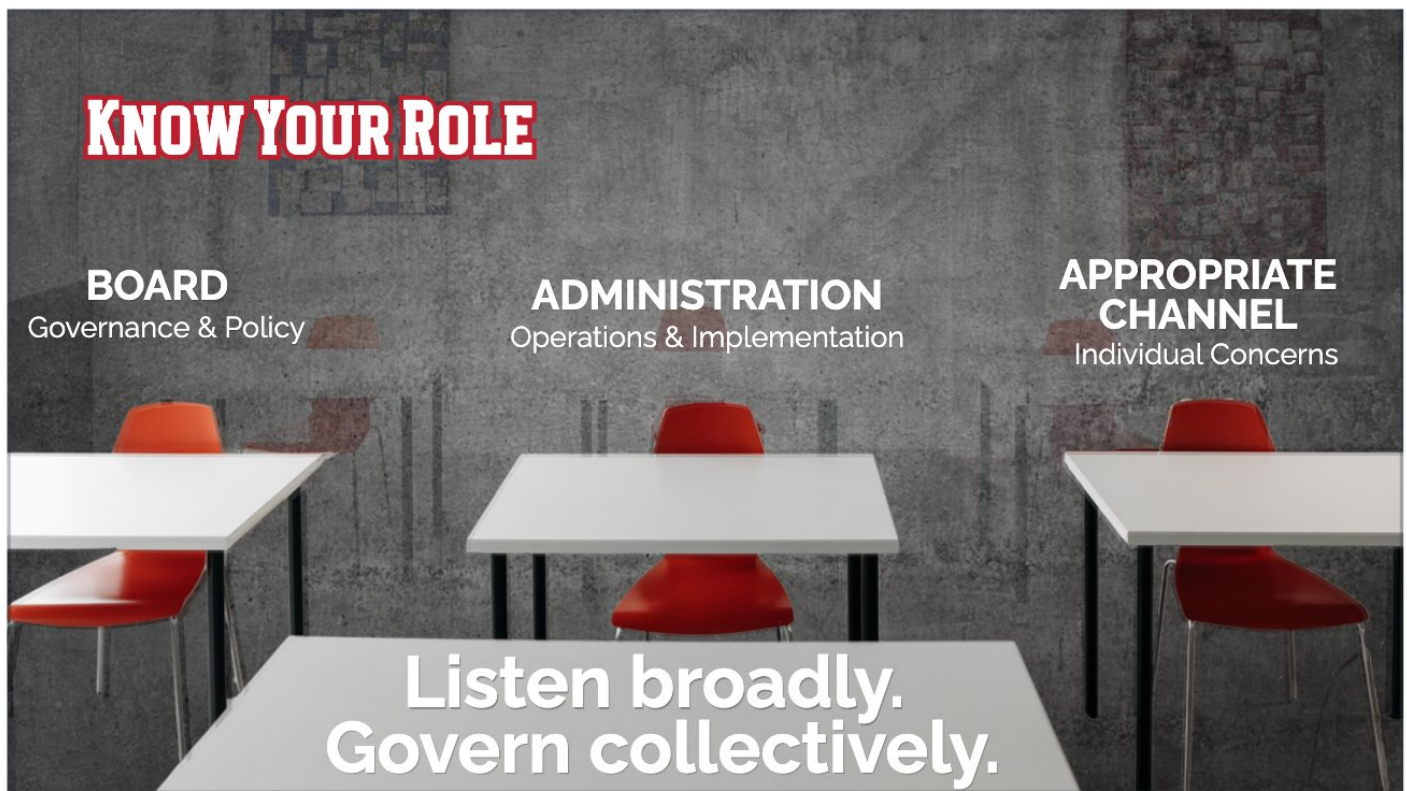
Here's what we learned.

Here's what we decided.

Here's why.

Some people may still disagree with you.

But disagreement and distrust are not the same thing



Now, before somebody leaves here and says, ‘Lesley told us we need to get out in the community and start solving everybody’s problems’—let me be very clear: I did not.

HOST doesn’t erase the line between governance and administration. In fact, good engagement should make that line clearer.

You are going to hear things. And everything you hear does not belong to you.

Some things belong here—at the board table. They may point to a policy issue, a pattern the board needs to understand, or something that should inform the board’s governance work.

Some things belong here—with the superintendent and administration. You can listen. You can understand the concern. But you don’t suddenly become the assistant superintendent responsible for fixing it.

And then there are individual concerns that belong here—in whatever process your district has established to address them. A personnel issue. A complaint about a teacher. A concern about a particular student. Authentic engagement does not mean bypassing the appropriate process.

And this is important: you can hear something without owning it. Listening to someone does not obligate you to personally solve their problem.

Sometimes the most respectful response is, 'I hear you. Here's where that concern belongs, and here's how you can get it to the right place.'

The danger is when engagement creates a second administrative system running through individual board members. That's not authentic engagement. That's confusion—and eventually it can undermine the very governance structure we're trying to strengthen.

So HOST doesn't mean everybody gets what they want. It doesn't mean every concern becomes a board issue. And it certainly doesn't mean individual board members start directing staff.

It means we listen broadly and govern collectively.

HOST TOGETHER

Before you invite people in, ask:

What are we trying to learn?

Whose voices do we need?

What will this inform?

How will we make sense of what we hear?

What happens next?

“Before you announce the meeting, send the survey, schedule the forum or invite anybody into the room, this is the conversation I want the board and superintendent to have.

What are we actually trying to learn?

Whose voices do we need to hear to understand it?

What decision, direction or work is this going to inform?

How are we going to make sense of what we hear instead of simply collecting comments?

And then the question people too often forget: What happens next?

If you can't answer these questions yet, you're probably not ready to ask your community for their time.

Because HOSTing starts before anybody walks through the door

HOSTing is leadership by design.



HOST them.