


How Principles Work

 How to apply the foundational building blocks of effective organizing, engagement, and equity work

Principles Defined

Principles are foundational concepts that serve as the basis for a system of thought, belief, organizing, or action. The best principles are grounded in evidence—whether it’s academic studies, data analysis, action research, or the wisdom gleaned from years of experience—and they can help practitioners apply seemingly disparate strategies as part of an integrated approach to advancing equity and justice in schools or communities.

The principles introduced on this website are intended to help local leaders, organizers, and facilitators understand some of the foundational concepts and strategies that motivate work in the fields of educational organizing, engagement, and equity. Our descriptions draw on the work of leading authorities, researchers, and practitioners, and they are aligned with similar sets of principles developed by organizations and thinkers in the field.

Yet because educational organizing, engagement, and equity issues can be complex and nuanced, our principles are merely starting points for continued dialogue, learning, and research. **We also invite readers to [send us recommendations for revision or improvement](#) →**

“When confronted with challenges related to civic engagement, a common response is an attempt to improve participation through a change in technique... [but] techniques alone cannot easily address the decades of community neglect and disinvestment that lead to the distrust, apathy, and inequity that characterize dysfunctional engagement environments. Distrust, apathy, and inequity are challenges that require a transformation in our approach to civic engagement rather than more techniques.... In order to truly transform the civic engagement environment in communities, we must shift from a civic engagement led by techniques to an engagement environment based on inclusive principles, allowing communities to create relevant practices that manifest those principles in the engagement environment. Our experiences have shown that carefully considered and articulated values and principles can act as positive, guiding forces in successful community engagement.”

Kip Holley, [***The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement: A Guide to***](#)

Transformative Change

On Organizing Engagement, we define a “principle” as:

A foundational building block of effective organizing, engagement, or equity work.

For principles to be useful, however, leaders, organizers, and practitioners should have confidence that a principle can be successfully applied in real-world situations. To that end, we believe that principles also need to meet the following standard:

If local leaders apply principles to a program, process, or practice, it's effectiveness as an organizing, engagement, or equity strategy will likely be improved.

For a concept to be considered a “principle,” and not just a good idea or useful recommendation, it also needs to meet the test of generalizability:

Principles need to be effective for multiple applications, in different contexts, and with diverse groups.

More specifically, then, principles can only be considered “foundational,” and therefore serve as the basis for a coherent system or approach, when they can be successfully applied (1) to varied programs, processes, or practices; (2) in diverse community, organizational, and school settings; and (3) for different stakeholder groups, including racially, culturally, professionally, or socioeconomically mixed groups.

In summary:

Principles are foundational evidence-based concepts that have been effective in advancing the goals of education organizing, engagement, or equity when used in diverse contexts, applications, and groups.

Putting Principles into Practice

To better understand how principles work in real-world settings, let's consider a hypothetical scenario commonly encountered in schools:

A high school administrative team wants to rethink the way it determines professional-development priorities for teachers because the current approach isn't producing results: student achievement has not measurably improved, and internal surveys indicate that many students are still disengaged in the classroom and that most teachers believe the professional development they've received is neither relevant nor effective. Based on this feedback from students and teachers, the administrative team decides that it needs to create more equitable opportunities for teachers to be actively engaged in the decision-making process.

But where should they start? And how can they evaluate whether a new approach is more or less likely to be effective? Here's where the foundational principles of organizing, engagement, and equity come in.

In this hypothetical case, principles can be used as a starting point for dialogue and as a general guide for planning and action. While it's impossible to guarantee that any new strategy will be effective, the administrative team can greatly increase its chances of success by applying foundational principles to the process. For example:

- **Transparency and Authenticity**: The administrative team can begin by sharing the full results of the student and teacher surveys, including any comments that may be critical of administrators or past decisions, along with relevant student achievement and demographic data. The team could tell the faculty what changes they are considering and why they are considering them, and then give teachers an opportunity to ask and raise hard questions, including questions that may directly challenge the default assumptions or expectations of administrators.
- **Information**: By sharing student-achievement and survey data at the outset, the administrative team has created conditions for a more informed and productive decision-making process. Rather than relying on subjective explanations or biased interpretations, or deferring to the most senior leader or the loudest voice in the room, the administrators and teachers can begin to develop a clearer, evidence-based picture of the problem, which can then be used to move people toward agreement on a plan of action. And if, for example, the outcome of the process results in the math department getting comparatively more professional-development funding and resources—because evidence indicates lower test scores and higher levels of student disengagement—the decision is more likely to be

supported by those who may end up with fewer resources.

- **Dialogue:** The administrative team can create opportunities for small-group discussions with teachers to surface their professional-development needs, interests, priorities, and recommendations. By opening up a dialogue, rather than presenting a predetermined program, the administrative team communicates that it's open to suggestions from teachers and that the final decision will not be made unilaterally by administrators. A foundation for shared decision-making has now been established.
- **Listening:** When it comes to advancing authentic forms of engagement in schools, listening is often the best place to start. By starting with dialogue and listening sessions, rather than trying to sell the faculty on a decision that's already been made, the administrative team signals that they value what their faculty has to say—an affirmation that can increase the willingness and motivation of teachers to be involved.
- **Facilitation:** To ensure that the dialogue process is efficient and productive, the administrative team could ask a group of teachers to facilitate the listening sessions and dialogues, which then allows the administrators to be involved in the discussions as participants and listeners. By handing facilitation responsibilities over to teacher-leaders, the administrative team has taken a step toward equalizing power dynamics between management and staff.
- **Inclusion:** Including teachers in the decision-making process lets the faculty know that administrators value their contributions, expertise, and recommendations. Inclusion is a powerful way to not only move toward an outcome that works better for everyone involved, but it can give participants a sense of personal and professional agency, while also strengthening understanding of the problem and proposed solutions among everyone who's involved and impacted.
- **Trust:** By being transparent from the beginning, listening to the faculty's concerns and recommendations, and involving them in the decision-making process, the administrative team has created essential preconditions for trust-building to occur. Over time, increased levels of trust between management and staff generally lead to better outcomes because it can build the buy-in and support that's essential to implementing and sustaining successful organizational change.
- **Co-creation:** When unilateral approaches to making decisions or resolving problems aren't effective, it's often because leaders didn't sufficiently understand the relevant needs, challenges, and goals, such as why the professional-development program wasn't working for teachers or why students continued to feel disengaged in the classroom. By involving teachers in the decision-making process and co-development of the new program—and ideally student voices, as well—the administrative team has significantly increased the odds that the resulting professional development will actually address the root problems they originally sought to resolve with a top-down approach.
- **Power Sharing:** By giving up some degree of control and authority, the administrative team is creating conditions for the faculty to feel a greater sense of agency and empowerment. Attrition and low morale among teachers is often [connected to feelings of disempowerment or distrust](#). Sharing power can not only be motivating to everyone involved, but it can also lead to more innovative ideas and strategies that end up working better. Given that the top-down approach didn't work in the past, the administrative team

has also created a situation in which their assumptions—about professional development, teacher needs, and student disengagement—are actively being questioned and reconsidered throughout the process, which increases the likelihood that the new program will be effective.

- **Ownership:** Because the faculty was involved in every step of the decision-making process, and they co-developed the new professional-development program in partnership with the administrative team, the likelihood that teachers will feel greater ownership over the program and its outcomes has dramatically increased. And because the teachers “made it themselves,” they are more likely to embrace new teaching techniques and actually use them in the classroom. Which is, of course, the purpose and goal of professional development.

Getting Started with Principles

In busy districts and schools that are often strapped for funding, it’s not always possible to bring in outside expertise to help design and facilitate an engagement process. By starting with principles, local leaders, organizers, and facilitators can not only begin to identify the foundational components of a more equitable, engaging, or empowering approach to addressing a problem, but they can also have greater confidence that they are on the right track.

For those who want to begin applying the principles of organizing, engagement, and equity in their school or community, perhaps the easiest way to get started is to create a simple table that allows participants to begin mapping out the specific features of a program, process, or practice, and then connecting those features with principle-based strategies. We’ve provided one example below.

While the following table illustrates one approach to connecting principles with proposed strategies, local leaders should use a process that works best for the participants involved, including any number **widely used protocols** that support group brainstorming, planning, and strategic thinking.

Program: Teacher-led professional development

Engagement Principles	Essential Features	Potential Strategies
Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Be honest- Share what you know (don't hide anything)- Explain your thinking- Explain your proposal- Answer questions- Don't get defensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Schedule faculty presentation and conversation- Brief faculty team leaders in advance- Prepare and send invitation- Explain purpose and rationale in email invitation
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Explain the problem- Shared desired outcomes- Share achievement data- Share survey data- Share total PD budget- Explain relevant limitations or resource constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Prepare analysis of achievement and survey data- Involve teachers and students in the analysis process- Develop presentation slides- Co-present with teachers and students
Listening, Dialogue, and Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Don't make assumptions- Practice active listening- Make sure everyone gets a chance to be heard- Provide structure- Equalize power dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Prepare essential questions- Identify teacher facilitators- Develop facilitator guide- Prep teacher facilitators- Hold small-group discussions on early release day

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