Accessibility

 Enabling the full and equitable participation of all community members

Accessibility Defined

The principle of *accessibility* in organizing, engagement, and equity work refers to conditions or strategies that enable the full and equitable participation of community members, particularly those who have historically been marginalized, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, or who have certain specialized needs.

Because basic access is a prerequisite for participation in any project, process, or campaign, accessibility should be seen as a foundational consideration when planning and designing organizing and engagement activities. Leaders, organizers, and facilitators who do not first ensure that opportunities are accessible may inadvertently neglect, exclude, marginalize, disrespect, or even alienate certain individuals or groups.

Importantly, accessibility in organizing, engagement, and equity work extends to all forms of access, whether it's informational, physical, financial, linguistic, or cultural forms of access. If stakeholders can't speak the language being used, can't understand what's being discussed, can't afford to participate, can't get to an event location, can't physically access a facility, or can't overcome other barriers to involvement, events and activities should be considered "inaccessible" to some degree.

In many cases, the most overlooked or neglected forms of accessibility are informational and cultural. School leaders may use educational jargon that's indecipherable to many students or family members, for example, or they may speak or act in ways that do not sufficiently take cultural differences into consideration, such as by assuming that parents are familiar with school procedures or customs that they may have never encountered before and don't understand. This is one of the reasons why engagement (sharing power with communities) and organizing (building power in communities) are often required to create conditions for equitable access.

Even well-intentioned school and organizational leaders can be unaware of inequities in their systems or how they impact the community, and increasing the voice, influence, and agency of students, families, and other stakeholders helps to ensure that community needs, concerns, and priorities are not only expressed and heard, but that those in positions of power and authority remain responsive and accountable to them.

Accessibility Strategies

This section describes a selection of representative accessibility strategies that may be used in education organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Using multiple culturally appropriate communication methods**
2. **Recognizing cultural blind spots**
3. **Addressing language barriers**
4. **Choosing accessible locations**
5. **Overcoming scheduling barriers**
6. **Providing essential accommodations**
7. **Offering incentives and financial assistance**

1. Using multiple culturally appropriate communication methods

For an opportunity to be considered accessible, people first need to know the opportunity exists. If leaders, organizers, and facilitators do not sufficiently promote organizing and engagement opportunities, a significant percentage of the community will likely remain unaware of the project, program, or process.

- Different forms or modes of communication may be required for different stakeholder groups. While some parents may pay attention to a school's official website announcements, social-media posts, emails, and texts, for example, other parents may only respond to personal outreach from a trusted friend, colleague, or community leader. Using multiple forms of communication—writing, audio, images, video—and distributing information through as many channels as possible—websites, emails, social media, phone calls, news outlets, community partners—is the surest way to reach as wide and diverse an audience as possible.
- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators may need to overcome any number of cultural or linguistic barriers to ensure that certain community groups are not only notified and invited, but that they also feel welcomed and wanted. In linguistically diverse communities,

translating informational and conversations can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, and schools and community groups often cite translation as one of the biggest challenges they face in their organizing and engagement work. Yet effective cross-cultural communication requires more than translation; it also requires an awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences. Consulting with members of different cultural groups, and co-developing communications materials with them, is one way to build greater cultural sensitivity into a communication strategy.

→ **For an in-depth discussion of cross-cultural communication, see Organizing Engagement's introduction to the <u>Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity</u>**

- One of the most commonly overlooked forms of communication—yet one of the most effective—is person-to-person outreach. People value their social relationships and connections, and they are often most responsive to interpersonal and face-to-face forms of communication. For example, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can ask staff members, volunteers, and partners to invite at least one friend, colleague, or family member to attend a meeting or event.
- Another communication strategy that may be overlooked is creating opportunities for interaction at places of communal gathering or celebration, such a public meeting, sporting event, or festival. Organizers can set up staffed information booths or tables, for example, to hand out pamphlets, answer questions, extend invitations, or collect signatures and survey responses.

2. Recognizing cultural blind spots

One of the most common and complex challenges routinely encountered in organizing and engagement contexts is *cultural difference*. Culture refers to the experiences, beliefs, customs, and other social factors that shape a person's view of the world, and in it's broadest sense culture encompasses not only race, ethnicity, or nationality, but also differences in age, class, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators should work to improve their cross-cultural self-awareness, sensitivity, and understanding through dialogue, research, training, and other strategies, particularly in relation to cultural groups that make up a significant percentage of a community's population. Yet because cultural differences are complex and multifaceted, actively seeking out partnerships with cultural groups, organizations, or movements can help build greater multicultural awareness, sensitivity, and understanding into a program or process. One of the most effective strategies is having multicultural teams leading every aspect of the design, coordination, and execution of an event, program, or other activity.
- When designing organizing, engagement, or equity activities, leaders, organizers, and practitioners often rely on their background, training, or education. While professional

experiences, expertise, and instincts can indeed be a reliable predictor of success, expertise itself can be biased or blinding, particularly when professionals act arrogantly or make assumptions about community members. Some community members may be unfamiliar with highly structured and facilitated conversations that only allow a fixed amount of time for a given conversation or activity, for example, and strategies that work for certain groups may not work as well for other groups.

- While organizers may intend certain activities to be energizing and motivating, some participants may find them confusing, uncomfortable, or even offensive. In some cases, past experiences and professional training can blind leaders, organizers, and facilitators to weaknesses in a given activity design, while a lack of experience or familiarity with common engagement techniques can result in awkward or unpleasant experiences for participants, especially when the rationale for a given practice has not been adequately explained.

- When designing activities, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can develop the habit of questioning their assumptions; suspending judgment or criticism; asking stakeholders from different cultural communities and backgrounds for advice and troubleshooting; and piloting strategies with smaller groups to identify potential weaknesses in an agenda or program that's intended for larger groups.

3. Addressing language barriers

In some schools and communities, several different languages—perhaps even dozens—may be spoken by students and families, and changing community demographics often make language barriers are one of the most challenging forms of accessibility that leaders, organizers, and facilitators routinely encounter when doing organizing, engagement, and equity work.

- A lack of English proficiency may not only be a barrier to full participation in English-only events, but it may also make some family members hesitant to either show up for events or speak up when they have concerns. In addition to translating informational materials and using interpreters during dialogues and other activities, leaders should also be sensitive to underlying personal or cultural factors that may be associated with language fluency.

- Even though someone may be able to speak both English and Spanish, for example, they may not feel comfortable or confident in the role of translator—and yet they may feel social pressure to translate during events when in fact they want to be participants in a conversation. In many cases, professional translators, translation services, or multilingual staff members present the best options for translation in multilingual contexts, but these options may not always be financially feasible for schools or community-based organizations.

- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can also provide stipends or other forms of compensation to community members who are willing to offer translation services, and schools might consider creating credit-bearing community-service programs for students who want to improve their translation skills or learn how to become interpreters. When

community members are enlisted as interpreters or translators—and appropriately valued and compensated for their skills and services—it can also help to increase the organizing, engagement, and equity capacity in a community, while also strengthening the commitment of these participants to a particular cause or campaign.

- It is also important to note that language fluency can function as a form of power, which can introduce inequities in organizing and engagement contexts. For example, participants who are not fluent in a dominant language may become confused about activities or expectations during a process, feel alienated or left out, or feel less confident about showing up or speaking up. In addition, fluent and native language speakers are not only privileged in their ability to understand what's being said, but language conveys a number of social and cultural cues and messages that can disadvantage—even disempower—non-fluent language speakers.
- One strategy for increasing equity and equalizing power dynamics in multilingual and multicultural contexts is to hold conversations in non-dominant languages and then provide translation for native speakers—rather than always defaulting to translating the dominant language for non-fluent speakers. Grouping participants based on language ability is another strategy that is sometimes used in organizing and engagement contexts, but facilitators should remain mindful that language-based grouping strategies can inadvertently maintain cultural segregation, which can then introduce a variety of problems or inequities, such as feelings of exclusion among some participants or a breakdown in communication or collaboration among different groups.

  → **Also see Organizing Engagement's introduction to Portland Empowered's Shared Space Café, an inclusive community-dialogue process that utilizes language-based grouping strategies and language translation for dominant-language speakers**

4. Choosing accessible locations

School facilities are often the default locations for community engagement activities. In some cases, however, schools and other official public forums may not present the most opportune or inviting locations for certain activities or community groups—perhaps because the school is not centrally located in the community, for example, or because some groups, such as recently arrived immigrant families, may not feel entirely comfortable in a school setting (at least initially).

- When designing programs and events, leaders, organizers, and facilitators should not only consider how a given location may affect certain community members, but they should try varying locations to see how different settings work for different groups. For example, activities held in a centrally located community center, in a neutral setting such as a public library, or in someone's home may increase participation rates among certain students, families, or cultural groups.
- Another common barrier to accessibility is transportation, particularly in rural areas or

communities that don't have comprehensive, low-cost public transportation systems. If participation in an organizing, engagement, or equity process requires access to a vehicle, it is likely that at least some community members will be unable to participate. For some groups—such as low-income families, older adults, or students—transportation will pose a more significant barrier to participation. In addition, some students, families, or community members could be hesitant to reveal they don't own a vehicle (perhaps for financial reasons), so it can be difficult to determine which community members and groups may not have access to reliable transportation.

- When transportation is a barrier to participation, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can consider strategies such as providing school-supported bussing, starting a volunteer carpooling program, offering free bus passes, and holding events in neighborhood locations, on bus routes, or at companies that employ significant numbers of parents and family members.

5. Overcoming scheduling barriers

Work schedules and other obligations, such as caring for children and older family members, are common barriers to participation for many community members. For this reason, leaders, organizers, and facilitators should not assume that a failure to show up or participate is evidence that students, families, or community members "don't care." While salaried office workers may be able to participate in weekend activities or leave work early for a 3:00 p.m. meeting, many hourly workers, parents holding down multiple jobs, and those with unpredictable work schedules may not have the same flexibility in their schedules.

- To minimize scheduling barriers, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can consider strategies such as surveying stakeholders to determine availability, holding events at different times of the day or week, or holding multiple events to increase the likelihood that a larger number of stakeholders will be able to participate.
- Another strategy is to create roles for community participants that do not require in-person attendance or that can be performed whenever someone has available time. For example, community members could conduct petition or pledge drives, make outreach and recruitment calls, manage websites or social-media accounts, or provide on-call translation services on conference calls and videoconferences. A good rule of thumb: If a community member expresses a desire to participate or contribute, leaders, organizers, and facilitators should find a way for them to get involved.

6. Providing essential accommodations

Community stakeholders may have any number of specialized needs that might require accommodations to improve or ensure accessibility in organizing, engagement, or equity activities.

- Being responsible for the care of young children is a common barrier to participation, for example, and the availability of on-site childcare can be a non-negotiable participation requirement for many stakeholders. Similarly, disabilities, hearing loss, visual impairment, or other physical limitations may require assistive technologies or specialized support staff to facilitate full and equitable participation.
- When designing engagement activities, local leaders may not be able to provide every accommodation that certain stakeholders may require, but the provision of appropriate or necessary accommodations should always be a primary consideration during a planning process—especially when accommodation-related barriers can be anticipated or when they will adversely affect a significant percentage of participants.

7. Offering incentives and financial assistance

Incentives are another way to improve accessibility in organizing, engagement, and equity work, although leaders, organizers, and facilitators should keep in mind that any given individual or group may not respond to incentives that might work for other individuals or groups. While a personal investment in their child's education or a sense of civic duty may be sufficiently incentivizing for many students, families, or community members, varied incentive strategies can be considered when designing and planning activities.

- Incentives can take a wide variety of forms. For example, parents will likely be more inclined to participate if their child has a prominent role in an event or process, and families may be more likely to get involved when childcare, food, and socializing opportunities are included in a process. Raffles, prizes, and small gifts may also be appropriate incentives in some situations.
- Financial incentives can be a particularly important accessibility consideration in low-income communities, but they may also be an important equity consideration. For example, some participants may lose wages because they have to take a day off or leave work early, or they may incur costs related to their participation, such as childcare or transportation expenses. In these cases, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can provide financial compensation for people's time, whether it's stipends, gift cards, bus passes, or other forms of compensation. If the work is supported by a grant, it may be possible to budget in advance for participant stipends or request permission to reallocate funds.
- Another important equity consideration is related to who is or isn't being paid for their time. In many organizing and engagement situations, employees of schools, universities, public agencies, and community-based organizations are being compensated for their time, while participants are being asked to donate their time. For example, community members are often asked to participate, without compensation, in studies or evaluations being conducted by well-paid academics and professional evaluators. In these cases, stipends and other forms of financial compensation can help ensure equitable and representative participation in a program or process, while also demonstrating that everyone's time, contributions, and

expertise are equally valued.

- Public recognition or certifications are another form of incentive that might be useful in certain situations. If local leaders publicly recognize and publicize stakeholder contributions, or if they offer certificates and other credentials for completing a workshop or training program, for example, it can increase the appeal of participation for some individuals and groups.

  → **For a related discussion, see the Celebration Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity work.**

- Perhaps the most important incentive in organizing, engagement, and equity work occurs when community members experience a sense of meaning, purpose, or accomplishment as a result of their participation. Students, family members, and other stakeholders often get involved in a school program or local campaign because they want to make a contribution, have an impact, or fix a problem that affects them or their family. They may want their school to provide a better education for their child, for example, or they may want to change a system they believe is unjust and unfair. If community members feel their concerns are being heard and acted upon, if they feel included and valued, if they believe they are making a difference in people's lives, or if they see evidence that their school or community is changing in response to actions they participated in, these emotional and meaningful experiences are likely to be far more powerful motivating influences than any material incentive.

Acknowledgments

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