Action

 Emphasizing the importance of progress and accomplishments

Action Defined

The principle of *action* in organizing, engagement, and equity work refers to the importance of *making progress* and *accomplishing something* of value to the community. Action can be contrasted with *process*—or activities such as meetings, conversations, and group planning that, while necessary and important for advancing a process, can engender feelings of fatigue, disinterest, or demoralization among participants if they go on too long without producing results. In short, too much process and too little action can sometimes lead to disengagement.

The action principle of organizing, engagement, and equity underscores the importance of both individual and collective accomplishment to maintaining energy, motivation, personal investment, and the perception of progress and accomplishment among participants in a group activity, project, process, or campaign. When participants start to feel that the only action occurring is *inaction*, the action principle can help local leaders revive interest or reinvigorate a process.

Discussion: Speed, Urgency, and Equity
In education organizing, engagement, and equity work, a common challenge is the relationship between action and equity:

If a process moves too slowly, the potential for disengagement may increase; but if a process moves too quickly, the potential for equity can decrease.

When leaders move too quickly, they can overlook the relationship-building and trust-building work that's essential to successful student, family, or community organizing and engagement, particularly for historically marginalized groups. While a thoughtful, well-constructed, and diligently executed process can create the foundational conditions necessary for equity, prolonged inaction can potentially kill momentum, disincentivize participation, and alienate highly motivated participants who got involved because they want to achieve something of value in their school or community.

In addition, *process without action* can sometimes be used—either intentionally or unintentionally—by those in positions of power, control, and authority to undermine community self-empowerment and organized action. For example, the common practice in education of creating community "advisory committees," which are sometimes convened in response to a crisis or controversy, can also be used as a stall-and-delay tactic: participants show up invigorated and ready to work, only to spend hours in disorganized or unfocused meetings and discussions seemingly without purpose or resolution. Over time, fewer and fewer people show up until someone finally calls for the disbandment of the

committee. The lingering few who remain go along with the motion out of exhaustion and demoralization, and—with the heat of the controversy now abated—the status quo systems responsible for the original problem continue to operate unchanged and unchallenged.

It is also important to note that leaders, organizers, and facilitators may also have to negotiate different levels of community urgency or eagerness—some participants may want to move forward quickly and aggressively, while others may advocate for a slower and more measured approach. For organizing, engagement, and equity leaders, it can be difficult to balance these competing desires and impulses, particularly in situations where community members are justifiably angry and impatient because change or justice has, in their view, been delayed for far too long.

To learn more about how principles can be applied in education organizing, engagement, and equity work, see **HOW PRINCIPLES WORK** →

Action Strategies

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

1. **Balancing process and action—or *moving at the speed of equity***
2. **Creating a variety of action roles for participants**
3. **Finding "quick wins" to build energy and momentum**
4. **Starting with small actions while building toward bigger actions**
5. **Making actions visible in the community**

1. Balancing process and action—or *moving at the speed of equity*

Achieving the right balance of thoughtful process and purposeful action should be a priority for leaders, organizers, and facilitators who not only want to engage or mobilize their youth, family, and community stakeholders, but who also want to create the foundational conditions necessary for equity.

- If leaders move too quickly in an engagement process, some voices or groups may be left out, some perspectives may be overlooked or inadvertently silenced, and stakeholders who

may need encouragement, personal outreach, or specialized accommodations to participate—whether it's transportation, childcare, or translation services—are unlikely to get involved. Yet if a process goes on too long without producing concrete actions and results, participants are more likely to respond with fatigue, disinterest, or demoralization.

→ **For a related discussion, see the [Accessibility Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity work.**

- To achieve the right balance of pace and equity, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can co-create organizing and engagement activities with community participants to ensure that a given process reflects their needs and goals. Candid participant feedback can also be solicited at each stage of a process, which allows leaders, organizers, and facilitators can monitor, evaluate, and respond to the waxing or waning of participant interest, commitment, and energy.
- Discouragement or disinterest may arise for reasons unrelated to pacing or progress. For example, community members may become discouraged if they don't feel sufficiently supported or encouraged by leaders, organizers, and facilitators; if they are unclear about expectations or their role in a process; if they don't feel they have the training or skills they need; or if they are feeling vulnerable or experiencing self-doubt.

2. Creating a variety of action roles for participants

People often decide to participate in an organizing or engagement process, project, or campaign because they want to make a contribution to their school or community or because they want to address a problem that affects them or their family. Disengagement is more likely to take hold if community members are only being asked to participate in a series of predetermined activities that are entirely designed and facilitated by administrators, officials, and others in positions of power.

- When participants are given active roles in the development and execution of a process—whether it's organizing an event, facilitating a conversation, recruiting other participants, or planning a community-organizing campaign—those roles can build a stronger sense of ownership, self-assurance, or team confidence among participants. People are also more likely to stay committed to a process, and more likely to be personally invested in achieving a positive outcome, when they are actively leading elements of its planning, coordination, or execution.
- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can consider creating a variety of potential roles for community members, including "scalable" roles that incrementally build knowledge, skills, and confidence over time. For example, community members could be asked to invite at least one friend, colleague, or family member to an organizing or engagement event, which could be followed by a small-group facilitation role, then a training program, and then a more formal leadership role on a team or committee.
- Designing and planning an effective engagement strategy or organizing campaign can take a lot of time, and at times participants may feel like the process is moving too slow or that

the group is not making progress. During these periods, leaders, organizers, and facilitators should recognize that "action" and "progress" can take many different forms. For example, if the objectives and structure of a community-organizing campaign are taking a lot of time to develop, organizers can continue to provide activities that strengthen the working relationships, teach new organizing skills, or develop the social and political "consciousness" of participants.

3. Finding "quick wins" to build energy and momentum

Organizing, engagement, and equity work is often focused on addressing big, complex issues such as historical tensions between the school system and community, persistent racial and socioeconomic inequities, or a lack of family involvement or leadership in schools. While community organizing and engagement can and should be used to solve a school or community's most challenging problems, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can also look for "quick wins" that directly support and prepare participants for "big wins"—i.e., momentum-building successes that can be achieved relatively easily with comparatively small investments of time, staffing, or money, and that don't drain resources or distract from larger strategic plans, campaigns, and goals.

- Quick wins not only help to demonstrate the value and transformative potential of community organizing and engagement, but they can also help generate momentum, energy, and excitement among participants that leaders, organizers, and facilitators can then build on over time.
- The most effective quick wins—those that produce the greatest excitement and enthusiasm—usually emerge from the expressed priorities and concerns of participants. For example, if family members identify language barriers as a source of frustration and disengagement, a school could begin to address their concerns by putting up signs in multiple languages, translating a selection of important informational materials, and embedding **Google Translate** into the school's website.

4. Starting with small actions while building toward bigger actions

Particularly in the early stages of a new organizing, engagement, or equity process, participants may become overwhelmed or intimidated by the scale and complexity of the problems facing their school or community. And indeed the most challenging problems usually take the most time to understand and address.

- When problems seem intractable and solutions elusive, small actions can help to build a sense of agency, progress, and accomplishment among participating community members. For example, if a long-term goal is to develop a home-visit program that reaches most or all

families in a school, start with a few trial visits, solicit feedback from participants, and then try another round of trial visits using a modified process that addresses the problems encountered during the first round of visits. Or if the goal is to hold a community dialogue series, start with a small group of hand-picked people who can give coordinators feedback on facilitation techniques or a draft discussion guide. Once a particular strategy has been tested and improved, local leaders can then expand, with greater confidence, the program's scope or the number of people involved.

→ **For related discussions, see the Facilitation Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity work, and our introduction to the Parent Teacher Home Visit Model**

5. Making actions visible in the community

When the community doesn't see visible signs of progress, impact, or success, they are more likely to become frustrated, disengaged, or demoralized. Leaders, organizers, and facilitators should consider routinely recognizing and celebrating progress with participants, while also proactively keeping the larger community apprised of progress through a variety of channels, whether it's the school website, email newsletters, social media, or columns and news stories in the local paper.

- In addition, organizing and engagement activities should not exclusively take place in school facilities or on school grounds—administrators and community leaders should host activities in a variety of accessible locations such as libraries, museums, community centers, or parks. Events that are open to the public can also be used as engagement opportunities; fairs, suppers, open houses, or neighborhood block parties can bring in new faces and provide opportunities to initiate relationships or recruit volunteers. Youth-led community service, including community-based learning or service-learning opportunities, can also serve to demonstrate, in a variety of visible ways, the benefits youth leadership, volunteerism, public service, and civic involvement to the community.
- One of the most effective ways to ensure that actions are "visible" is to make organizing and engagement work as open, inclusive, transparent, and participatory as possible, while keeping "closed-door" meetings to a minimum—or by eliminating them altogether. Ideally, a representative coalition of community members should be involved from the very beginning of a process—when problems are being identified, the first decisions are being made, and agendas and plans are getting established—through every stage of execution and conclusion.

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