

**Tackling Tough Problems in the 21st Century:
Rethinking Parent Engagement in K-12**

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**Three key questions regarding
public engagement**

What is the nature of the problems we are facing in our communities (and schools)?

What kind of communication or engagement processes help us address those problems?

How can we best build community capacity to support those processes?

**The Nature of Problems in the 21st Century: Tame
v. Wicked Problems**

Tame problems are problems that are essentially **technical** in nature and can be **solved by experts** through **scientific means**. They can be divided into **manageable** parts, and efforts to solve them are primarily judged in terms of **efficiency**. (Rittel & Webber, 1973)

**The Nature of Problems in the 21st Century:
Tame v. Wicked**

- Wicked problems inherently involve **competing underlying values**, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that cannot be resolved by science.
- Any proposed solution to a wicked problem tends to create new problems. Wicked problems are **systemic**.
- Optimal solutions to wicked problems often require **adaptive changes** rather than technical ones. The public must be a part of any solution.
- Addressing wicked problems thus necessitates **effective collaboration** and **communication** across multiple perspectives.
- Wicked problems often require **creativity, innovation, and imagination**. They can't be adequately addressed through the accumulation and application of knowledge, but call for the **ongoing process** that relies on collective wisdom and the application of sound judgment.

Key American Values

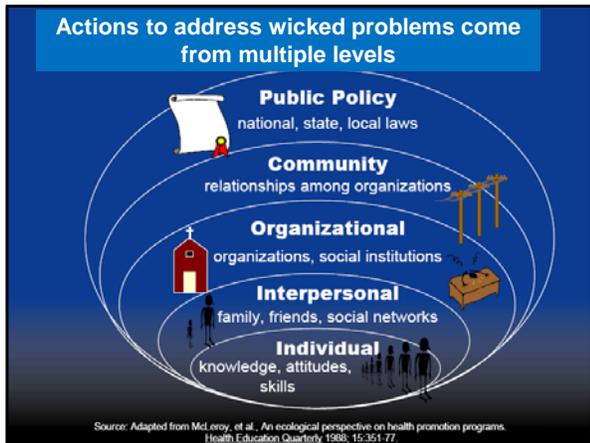
Preamble	Current Phrasing
Justice	Justice
Domestic Tranquility/ Common defense	Security/Safety
General Welfare	Equality
Liberty to ourselves	Freedom (for us)
Liberty for our posterity	Freedom (for future generations)

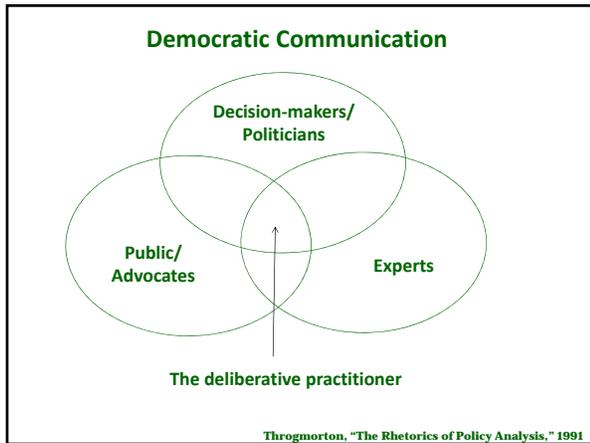
Tensions between key values

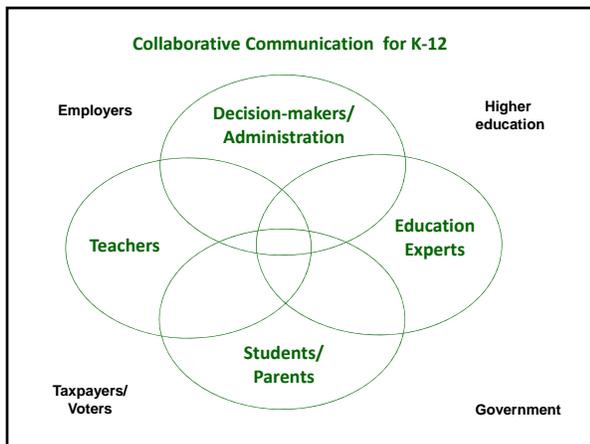
Freedom v. Equality
 Freedom v. Security
 Freedom for us v. Freedom for next generation
 Justice/Fairness as an ideal balance

Some others:

Individual rights v. community/common good
 Unity v. diversity
 Cooperation v. competition
 Flexibility/Innovation v. Consistency/Tradition
 Best use of resources (money, time, people)







Three Primary Models of Public Problem Solving

- **Adversarial** (competitive, pro/con, activists, campaigns, interests groups, mobilizations, elections, votes, coalitions, etc.)
- **Expert** (experts, data focused, research, facts, technical solutions, bureaucracy, etc.)
- **Deliberative** (cooperative, participatory, collaborative, public participation, conflict resolution and transformation, mediation, community focused, civic participation, etc.)



Drawbacks of Overly-Adversarial Processes

- Often focuses on “winning” vs. solving problems
- Zero-sum game incentivizes “bad” communication, strategic research, and problematizes implementation
- Often focuses on blaming (them) vs. taking accountability (us)
- Relies on narrow value frames (thus avoids tensions)
- Plays into flaws of human nature
- Attracts/privileges organized, entrenched voices
- Negative side effects like polarization, cynicism, and apathy (which then cause even worse communication)
- Assumes a narrow role for citizens (citizens as voters, consumers, or spectators)

What We Are Learning from Brain Science

The Problematic

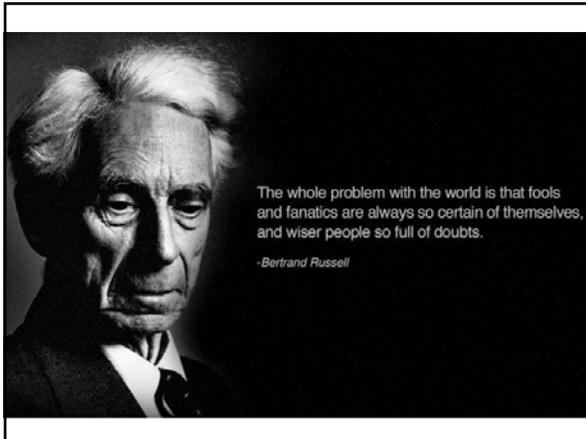
- We crave certainty and consistency
- We are suckers for the good v. evil narrative
- We strongly prefer to gather with the like minded
- We filter & cherry pick evidence to support our views
- We avoid values, tensions, and tough choices



What We Are Learning from Brain Science

Stages of motivated reasoning

- **What and who we expose ourselves to** (*selective exposure /echo chambers*)
- **How we interpret new evidence** (*confirmation bias*)
- **How we make attributions and tell stories** (*egoism, illusory correlation, negativity bias*)
- **How we make decisions** (*heuristics, tribal bias, social proof*)
- **What we remember**



False Polarization

[individually developed
subconscious biases]

X

[negative interaction effects]

X

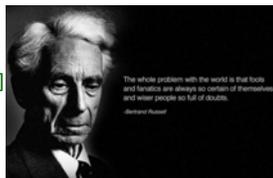
[the Russell effect]

X

[purposeful partisan manipulation
and the vicious cycle of backlash]

X

[media focus on conflict]



What We Are Learning from Brain Science

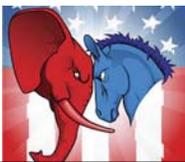
The Good

- We are inherently social and seek community
- We are inherently empathetic
- We are inherently pragmatic and creative
- We can overcome our bad tendencies and build better habits



The Problem We Face

Most of our processes for public engagement and community problem solving primarily tap in to the negative aspects of human nature, and rarely activate the good.



Drawbacks of Expert-Dominated Processes

- Experts by definition are focused on a specific, narrow aspect of the problem.
- Experts often focus on being “value free” (they tell us what *is* or what *could* be, not what *should* be)
- Expert perspectives can overemphasize what can be measured and underemphasize what cannot
- Wicked problems can be informed, but not solved by data
- Good data is undermined in a polarized environment
- Data doesn’t have a strong record with changing behavior
- Expert dominated processes shut out the public

The Bottom Line

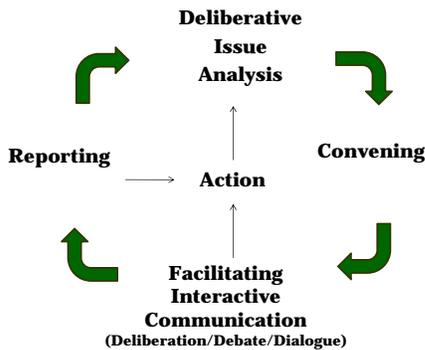
- We face serious problems (both within our schools and outside our schools that many expect schools to address).
- Many do not have technical solutions.
- They involve paradoxes and competing values that will require tough choices.
- Facing them calls for productive collaboration, innovation, and coordinated action across perspectives and many areas of society.
- Current communication and problem-solving are inadequate and often counter-productive....and we know about much better ways to make tough decisions.

What is Deliberative Engagement?

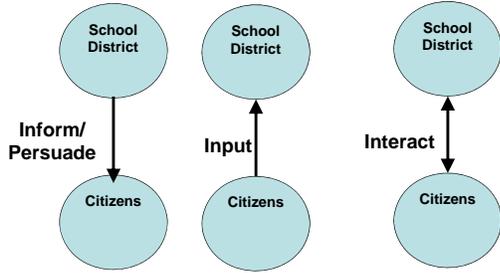
Deliberation is an approach to public engagement in which **citizens**, not just experts or politicians, are deeply involved in public decision making. Often working with facilitators or process experts who utilize a variety of deliberative techniques, citizens **come together** and **consider relevant facts and values** from **multiple points of view**; **listen** to one another in order to think critically about the various options before them; consider the underlying tensions, **tough choices**, and varied **consequences** inherent to addressing public problems; are willing to **refine and adapt their opinions and interests**; and ultimately seek to come to some conclusion for **collaborative action** based on a **reasoned public judgment**.



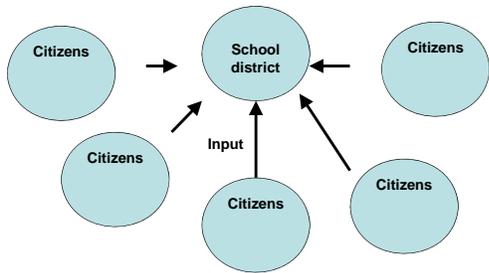
The Cycle of Deliberative Inquiry



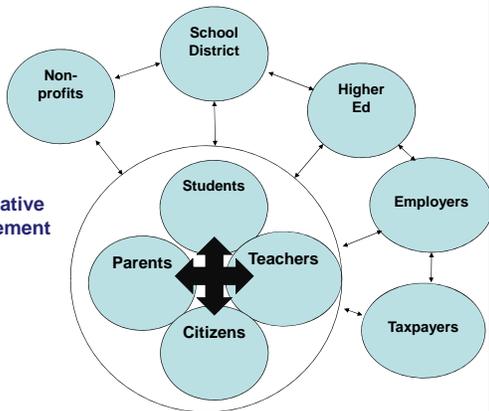
Traditional Forms of Public Engagement

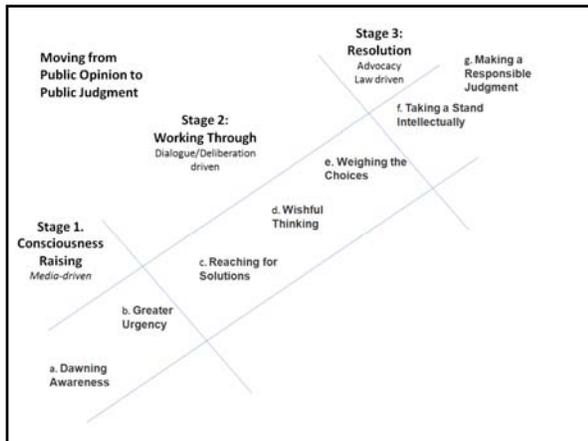


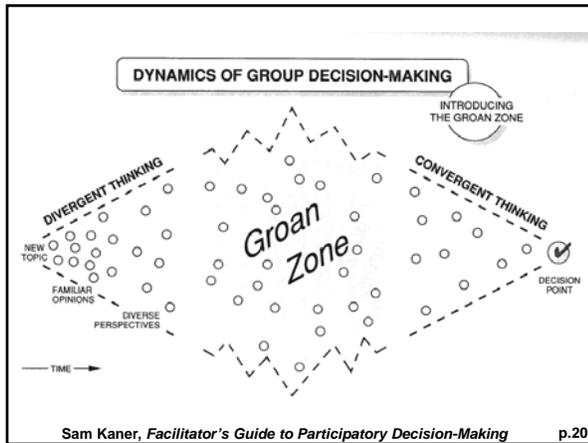
Traditional Forms of Public Participation



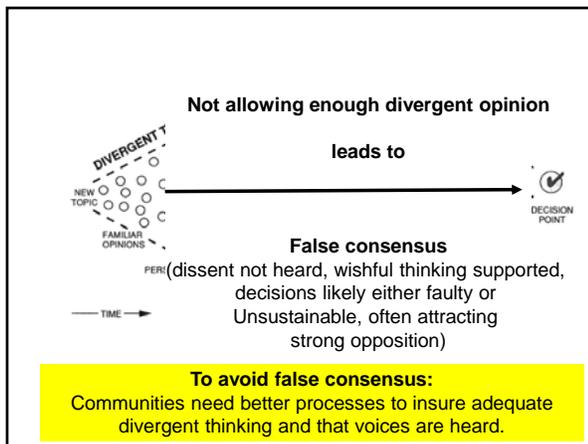
Deliberative Engagement

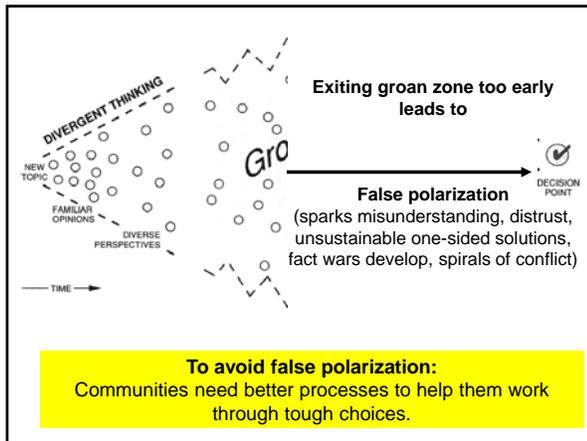


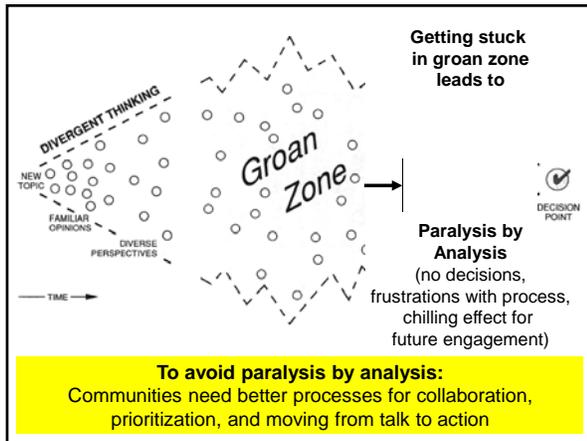




Sam Kaner, *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* p.20







Potential Applications to the Five Star Leadership Academy

- Working against the negative consequences of overly adversarial processes and the limits of experts
- Helping the community identify and work through tough choices and address wicked problems
- Identifying and building capacity for deliberative engagement throughout the cycle
- Working to improve communication and increase interaction between decision-makers (school board/principals), experts (superintendent, staff), and the public (parents, taxpayers, businesses)
