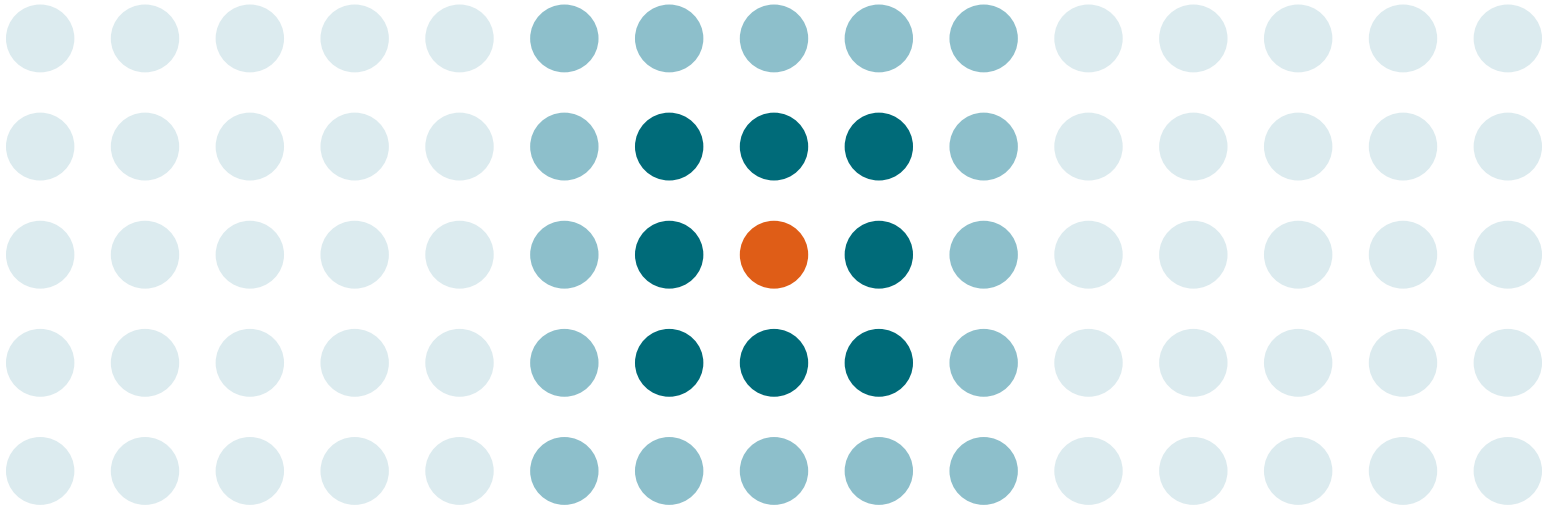




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Transforming Public Life:

A DECADE OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN BRIDGEPORT, CT

by Will Friedman, Alison Kadlec, and Lara Birnback

Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) researches, develops and disseminates new insights and practices that help improve the quality of American public life by building the field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics.

CAPE is dedicated to creating new and better ways for citizens to confront pressing public problems. CAPE is housed within Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit opinion research and public engagement organization founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.

For nearly three decades, Public Agenda has been working in communities to help citizens understand complex problems and create momentum for change by building common ground, managing differences and creating new partnerships. The Center serves the field by advancing three distinct but interrelated strands of work:

- The Public Engagement **Research Project** conducts and disseminates studies that clarify the dynamics and impacts of specific public engagement practices. Among the questions it explores are: What are the short-and-long term impacts of public deliberation on citizens, communities, leadership and public policies? What are the impacts of framing public issues for deliberation in contrast to framing them for purposes of persuasion—and what are the democratic implications of those differences for the media, political and civic leadership and civic participation? Why do deliberative democratic habits and practices take root in some communities more than others? And how can deliberation practices best go to scale, and be applied beyond the level of individual communities?
- The **Digital Engagement Project** experiments with and explores new internet-based tools and their application to engaging citizens in public deliberation and problem-solving. Guiding questions include: Can the internet only be used to link together like-minded people, or are there effective ways to produce greater “boundary-crossing” online, bringing diverse citizens together to better understand their differences? Can blogging contribute to deliberative public engagement, or only to partisan electoral or interest group politics? Is deliberation feasible within online communities?
- The **Theory-Building Project** promotes greater interplay between researchers and practitioners to improve the field's understanding of how public deliberation works and how it can work better. Principal areas and inquiry are: How does the public come to judgment? How does public deliberation relate to political and social change?

Major support for the Center is provided by the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation**, the **Rockefeller Brothers Fund** and the **Kettering Foundation**.

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by Will Friedman, Ph.D., Alison Kadlec, Ph.D., and Lara Birnback

Introduction

On the face of it, the story of Bridgeport, Connecticut, is a familiar one. After losing much of its manufacturing and industrial base following the Second World War, the city confronted the problems of many old industrial cities—high unemployment, a shrinking tax base, the growth of violent crime and drugs. Like many other cities, it has also become highly diverse, with more than 60 languages spoken among its roughly 139,000 residents.¹

So far, so familiar. But what sets Bridgeport apart from cities with similar histories is the evolving story of its uncommonly rich civic life. When it comes time to solve community problems or make and implement public policy, the institutions, organizations, and individuals of Bridgeport defy business as usual through a remarkably inclusive and deliberative citizen-centered approach to problem solving.

This model of open, broad-based, ordinary citizen engagement has become, really, a way of doing business in Bridgeport.

—Sonja Ahuja, Project Manager, League of Women Voters, Connecticut Education Fund (LWVCT Education Fund)

As a result of roughly a decade of hard work by organizations, “ordinary” citizens and various local leaders, public engagement has become embedded in the life of the community. Indeed, practices of public engagement have taken root to such an extent that it is by all accounts relatively rare to find behind-the-scenes decision-making by a small group of elites.

We’ve got a much better tendency here to share leadership on things... When this community gets left out of stuff, there can be uprisings. It makes bad political sense to “top-down” stuff in Bridgeport.

—Robert Francis, Executive Director, RYASAP²

This is not to suggest that leaders and experts mindlessly or spinelessly pander to the whims of public opinion. Rather, it is that a culture of problem-solving has evolved in which citizens are viewed as vital resources and as stakeholders who must be consulted and involved if challenges are to be addressed effectively.

¹ A little more background: In 2000, the median income for a family in Bridgeport was about \$44,800, compared with \$50,000 for the U.S. overall. White residents make up 44 percent of the city’s population, African Americans around 36 percent, and about 33 percent are Hispanic. Bridgeport Public Schools, the second largest system in the state, serves around 22,250 students, and some 96 percent are from lower-income families and qualify for free or reduced price student lunch.

² RYASAP once stood for “Regional Youth and Adult Substance Abuse Program,” but because it has expanded its scope well beyond the issue of substance abuse, and is now an “urban/suburban youth community development coalition,” the organization is simply known by its acronym.



This case study traces the evolution of this unusual civic culture and reflects on its lessons. It covers:

I. A Decade of Public Engagement in Bridgeport

(Beginning on page 03)

We begin this section by describing how experiments in public engagement came to occur in Bridgeport. We then discuss how engagement has effectively moved beyond the “project” phase to become a fundamental attitude about how business is conducted and an evolving set of civic practices now deeply embedded in the life of the community. In particular, we examine how engagement expanded beyond its initial focus on education to span multiple issues, institutions and community networks—what we call “thick” public engagement.

II. Impacts

(Beginning on page 06)

In this section we assess the impacts of the civic attitudes and practices described in Part I, which we cover under the headings of a more collaborative political culture, a more active, responsible citizenry, more inclusive leadership/more sustainable policy, and more benefits for kids. Under the last topic we review evidence suggesting that public engagement in Bridgeport has contributed to better student achievement and the narrowing of achievement gaps.

III. Reflections

(Beginning on page 14)

The final section discusses the lessons we believe Bridgeport offers to the field (i.e., practitioners of public engagement and students of deliberative democracy). Specifically, we examine what the case has to say about how engagement becomes embedded in the life of a community, and how it can affect change when it does. Finally, we consider some of the challenges that continue to face the community as it deepens its culture of engagement.



I. A Decade of Public Engagement in Bridgeport

In 1996, the Bridgeport Public Education Fund (BPEF) joined a national demonstration project led by Public Agenda and the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL). The project explored the possibilities for public dialogue about education reform among diverse stakeholders. Soon after, the BPEF joined a statewide engagement initiative called the Connecticut Community Conversations Project, to significantly broaden and deepen the scope of that initial effort.

Formally launched in 1997, the Connecticut Community Conversations Project was a joint effort on the part of the Connecticut-based William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, Public Agenda, IEL and the Connecticut League of Women Voters. Adopting the engagement model originally designed and developed through the Public Agenda/IEL national project, the Connecticut Community Conversations Project has since spread to over eighty towns and cities across the state. Thousands of parents, education professionals, students, local policy and business leaders, seniors and others have taken part in public dialogue on the purposes of education, closing achievement gaps, ensuring school safety, promoting school readiness, preventing bullying and many other youth-and-education topics.

While the Connecticut Community Conversations Project has been an important state-wide initiative, Bridgeport has distinguished itself in terms of both the quantity of Community Conversations (numbering roughly 40 so far) and in how the very fabric of public decision-making has evolved.

Embedding New Patterns of Civic Problem Solving

The Bridgeport Education Fund, a catalyst for public deliberation in Bridgeport, is an organization with the goal of securing a quality public education for all children. The group's executive director, Marge Hiller, has been a tireless advocate for public engagement, and her dedication over the years has been instrumental in embedding public engagement in her community. She is a prime example of what Harvard researchers Archon Fung and Elena Fagotto term a "deliberative entrepreneur."

Deliberative entrepreneurs understand that there is a 'market' for public deliberation: the general public favors more opportunities to participate in public discussion and provide input in policymaking, and public institutions as well as civil society organizations can use deliberation as a problem-solving tool.³

Since the mid-90s, the BPEF has itself facilitated around 25 Community Conversations and assisted other community organizations to convene and host at least another 5-10 of one sort or another. However, as Fung and Fagotto point out in their study, so many Bridgeport-based groups and organizations have used and adapted the Community Conversations model that it is difficult at this stage to determine the true number and themes of all the engagement activity that has taken place.⁴

Today, even more than a convener of deliberations, the BPEF finds itself in the role of advisor to many groups and individuals, offering consulting and training for conversation organizers and moderators, and helping groups frame issues for deliberation. Thus, what started as an experiment by one organization has blossomed into a new set of community practices and—it may not be too much to say—a changed political culture.

³ E. Fagotto and A. Fung, "Embedded Deliberation: Entrepreneurs, Organizations, and Public Action," final report for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (unpublished), 2006.

⁴ We encountered the same difficulties in our own research: many of those we spoke with talked about the regularity of Community Conversations and the different spin-offs from the original model, but no one seemed able to give a final accounting of the number of Conversations or the topics discussed. Quite possibly, the point at which community members cannot keep up with all the engagement activities taking place in their community should be counted as a threshold indicator of "embeddedness."



Making the Work Their Own

Although both the BPEF and the organizations it works with have adjusted the Community Conversations model over time for specific purposes, there are a number of fundamental and indispensable elements that remain constant—elements that are critical to achieving a process that is productive and meaningful for participants and organizers. These core components include:

- Non-partisan sponsorship and organization of the process, which is usually best accomplished by a diverse coalition of organizations
- The recruiting of a truly diverse cross-section of participants with varied perspectives on the issue at hand, with special effort to include members of the general public and traditionally marginalized groups
- Breaking up large forums into smaller, diverse dialogue groups of roughly 10-15 individuals
- Use of non-partisan discussion materials that present choices and help participants weigh the alternatives (what Public Agenda calls “Choicework”)
- Trained moderators and recorders to facilitate small group dialogue
- A strong commitment to follow-up, linking public dialogue to processes of social, political, and policy change⁵

Early on, Bridgeport employed video discussion starters created by Public Agenda which frame issues in a non-partisan and easily understandable way. Over time, Bridgeport organizations have gone on to create their own videos and other discussion starter materials. In one instance students performed a short play as a springboard to the discussion, and in another, a new video was made using local parents, teachers and other community members.

We made our own video. We used teachers, parents, students, and the superintendent, and the parent [PAC] president and every time we ran a conversation—we must’ve had 20 or so of them using that video. People would get so excited by recognizing people they knew!

—Marge Hiller, Executive Director, Bridgeport Education Fund (BPEF)

Bridgeport’s capacity for this work has developed to the point where a cadre of trained moderators and recorders are essentially “on call.”

There [are] minimally twenty-five people who have been trained as moderators and recorders, who would be ready to serve, virtually at a moment’s notice... It does involve a pretty diverse group of people from many parts of the community.

—Sonja Ahuja, Project Manager, LWVCT Education Fund

⁵ For more on Public Agenda’s Community Conversations model, see Will Friedman, “*Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut: A Report on the Connecticut Community Conversations Project*,” Updated Version (New York: Public Agenda, 2005), p. 3. For a more formal theoretical discussion of the importance of the design of public engagement processes, see Alison Kadlec and Will Friedman, “Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power,” *Journal of Public Deliberation*, Volume 3, 2007.

From Narrow to “Thick” Public Engagement

Public engagement in Bridgeport was initially applied to problems of education and school reform. But over time, its use has broadened to neighboring issues, and then to neighbors of the neighbors, encompassing more and more aspects of public life. Engagement in Bridgeport has thus evolved from a relatively narrow stream of activity to an increasingly multi-layered, “thick” community phenomenon.

The tracks of this migration, from narrowly focused to thick engagement, show how issues related to education frequently extend beyond the school grounds and are interconnected with other community assets, needs and challenges. It shows as well how a social experiment can become a widely-shared and transformative community practice. From an early focus on school reform, public conversations have since explored a wide range of subjects: pre-kindergarten education for children suffering from mental-health problems, after-school programs,

achievement gaps, school safety, family violence, employment needs, corruption in city government, housing, economic development and more. By the same token, numerous groups besides BPEF have convened or taken part in a Community Conversation sponsoring coalition, including the City of Bridgeport, the Board of Education, the United Way, the Regional Youth Adult Substance Abuse Project (RAYASAP), the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, and the Bridgeport Regional Business Council. As a result:

The language becomes everybody’s language. Everybody knows what a Community Conversation is. They know what engagement means. They also [understand that] this is how we have to make decisions.

—Marge Hiller, Executive Director, BPEF



II. Impacts

If public engagement is truly an important political practice there ought to be something to show for it after ten years' experience in a single community. While causal connections are always difficult to trace in complex social systems, our interviews and observations suggest that important impacts have indeed begun to exist, which we discuss under the following headings:

- A more collaborative political culture
- A more active, responsible citizenry
- More inclusive leadership/more sustainable policy
- More benefits for kids

A More Collaborative Political Culture

When we asked local leaders to reflect on the broader impacts of public engagement in Bridgeport, many pointed to the way that individual organizations and relations between organizations have been transformed as public engagement has become rooted in the life of the community.

The development of community engagement as a standard operating procedure is, I would say, the most direct outcome of this work. The fact that it continues to be the way that things are done [in Bridgeport] is itself a real impact on relations and organizations.

—Marge Hiller, Executive Director, BPEF

When an organization or group thinks they want to find out about something, or come up with a plan, they really automatically go to a large, broad-based practice, rather than saying, "Let's get the five or six best experts on this issue into a room to figure it out."

—Adrienne Houel, Action for Bridgeport Community Development, Inc. (ABCD)

Local leaders describe an unusual level of collaboration among organizations and service providers in the community, in large part because most now share the language of public engagement, and have the capacity to carry it out with some regularity. As one community leader told us, "We've got a much better tendency here to share leadership on things." A business leader added,

What happened with the Community Conversations is there were some people that got involved from very, very different backgrounds. They worked really well together. They were willing to really share and collaborate.

—Kathy Saint, President, Schwerdtle Stamp Company

A More Active, Responsible Citizenry

Sound public engagement helps citizens develop a more realistic understanding of the trade-offs involved in difficult public problems. This, in turn, helps them learn to hold leaders accountable in realistic and effective ways. As a community leader points out:

Issues can be complicated, and the more [ordinary citizens] are involved, the more they learn. That's very good. It creates a... raised base of knowledge in our community, and it means that there's more ability for parents and community members to assess what's happening and what should be happening, and to hold folks accountable.

—Robert Francis, Executive Director, RAYASAP

But if holding leaders accountable is one part of the equation, an equally important part is peoples' willingness to take responsibility themselves.

We use the parents who have been trained to be our moderators and facilitators when we have other conferences, and their leadership skills have expanded dramatically. When they're the ones that are in front of the group, everybody else is much more comfortable speaking and taking responsibility.

—Marge Hiller, Executive Director, BPEF

We've had three or four years of strengthening our after school programs... It started very much as a community process with mostly just resident citizen types and young people and expanded.

—Robert Francis, Executive Director, RAYASAP

As these examples and comments suggest, Bridgeport's culture of engagement appears to be contributing to such vital civic capacities as responsible citizen leadership and an ethos of collective responsibility.

More Inclusive Leadership/More Sustainable Policy

Just as it has changed the way “average” citizens look at community problems, public engagement has changed the way leaders look at citizens. In most communities, leaders engage citizens as much or (more typically) as little as they wish. In Bridgeport, by contrast, business, education, and other types of community leaders told us again and again that they simply *must* consult and collaborate with the community on most important issues.

As a result, leaders have been forced to slow down and be much more inclusive than they are accustomed to be. If truth be told, they sometimes find this to be a frustrating process. But many also recognize that they are likely to produce more effective and long-lasting solutions via this route than would be the case if decisions were made by a few experts or power-wielders in isolation from the rest of the community.

I think when you are doing policy, it kind of takes the burden off the department or the individual that has to make the final decisions on it to say, “You know this is something that the community believes in, this is something that the community has bought into, and this is something that they're willing to support.”

—Tammy Papa, Director, Lighthouse After-School Programs

To show how leaders come to terms with an engaged community, we will present two case vignettes, beginning with business leaders and then proceeding to a new superintendent of schools.



Business Leaders Buy In

Community foundations and service providers had been urging the business community to play a more active role in Bridgeport's schools for years. In May of 2006, things began to turn as numerous rounds of community engagement, and the efforts of the United Way and others culminated in "The Community's Education Summit."

In that session, over 500 community members participated in identifying and prioritizing goals for educational excellence. A number of business leaders who were participating decided it was time for the business community to see what it could do to help with an issue of central importance to community support: restoring trust in the school system and its ability to handle its finances.

It wasn't until [business] started hearing from so many different places and from [hundreds of] people...that there was no trust [in the schools] that they got on board and said, "Yes, we can do something about this." The only thing that was holding back that trust level was how was the money being spent.

—Marge Hiller, Executive Director, BPEF

As one business leader described the process,

What would be necessary to get the business community actively involved in advocating for funding for the education system? The number one thing was there's got to be transparency in the finances.

We went to the mayor, the Superintendent, the City Council, and the Board of Ed. We brokered an agreement between all of them that—if we raised the money to bring in a consultant to put together a plan for separating the city budget and the Board of Ed. budget so there would be clear transparency and accountability— that they would support that.

—Kathy Saint, President, Schwerdtle Stamp Company

From the perspective of community leaders, this issue of budgetary transparency was not only the single biggest problem in the school system it was also a problem that could not be effectively addressed without help from the business community.

It took the business community to really step in and say, "We understand that this is the biggest issue, and we're going to help fix it... It's what everybody says has to happen. You [i.e., individuals] can't fix it. The city won't fix it...so we [the business community] are going to fix it."

—Marge Hiller, Executive Director, BPEF

Uneasy Converts to Public Engagement

Our first point, then, is that after a great deal of public engagement, business became convinced that it should become more involved in the critical community issue of improving education, and has done so with important impacts. But there's another important point to this story; not only has business become more active in school improvement in Bridgeport, it has begun to accept more fully and to participate more actively in the community's ethos and culture of citizen engagement in general.

In the last couple years, the Business Council has decided that it will support a number of community collaboratives, and Community Conversation-type initiatives.

—Adrienne Houel, ABCD

This is all the more impressive because engagement has not been a natural and easy sell to the business community. It's true that some innovative business leaders recognize the importance of engaging employees in continuous improvement of their operation, and on that basis ought to be amenable to arguments about the usefulness of engaging citizens in community problem-solving.⁶ But the inclusive and deliberative citizen-centered decision-making that Bridgeport has embraced is likely to remain a stretch for most business leaders, who tend to be most comfortable with more traditional modes of decision-making. As one business leader said, “[public engagement] is a little bit frustrating because...real community engagement, meaningful community engagement...lengthens the process dramatically. It's very—I always call it “painful.” It's hard; it's hard work.”

Some appear to have accepted public engagement because they've had to—ultimately, that's simply the way things are done in Bridgeport.

Our business community has learned to be very patient with change here, because they know that community involvement is one of our cultural traits now and we've got to have it.

—Paul Timpanelli, President and CEO,
Bridgeport Regional Business Council (BRBC)

But others seem to have recognized that slowing down for “meaningful community engagement” is worth doing for the results it can achieve.

[Public engagement] is the preferred route because the end product is normally better. The more inclusive it is, the more supportable it is.

—Paul Timpanelli, President and CEO, BRBC

There's a very significant number of individuals [in the business community] that buy into the engagement process. I buy into it and I support it because I think it gets us to where we want to go.

—Paul Timpanelli, President and CEO, BRBC

⁶ See, e.g., Steven J. Spear, “Learning to Lead at Toyota,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 1, 2004; Will Friedman, “Employee Involvement and Civic Engagement,” Work in America Institute, 2002.



A Superintendent's Experience of Public Engagement

Appointed superintendent roughly two years ago, Dr. John Ramos's education in the civic mores of his new community began when he was approached by a group of local engagement leaders. Some in his position might well have fought this "intrusion" of the public into their professional domain; others might have paid it lip service and then tried to go their own way. For his part, Dr. Ramos appears to have embraced it, arguably to his own advantage and, more importantly, to the advantage of his students and the community overall.

For example, Superintendent Ramos developed an unusually inclusive strategic planning process involving a diverse cross-section of community members. Specifically, after conducting an initial series of assessments to generate baseline data about the fiscal, instructional, and organizational characteristics of the district, a group of thirty-two individuals from the community participated in a two-day strategic planning process in which they deliberated about the data.

First of all, this group produced a mission statement, which begins with the following clause:

The mission of the Bridgeport public schools and its supporting community is to graduate all students 'college ready' and prepared to succeed in life.

What is unusual about this phrase is that it positions the community as a partner in education, rather than as a client or consumer. As Dr. Ramos explained, it is one thing to say that the district will do x, y and z and perhaps "consult" with the community in the process, but it is another thing altogether to say that the community stands with the district in crafting and executing the vision. Dr. Ramos remarks,

I've worked in other districts...and I've never seen anything like this. The community stakeholders at the table were adamant about this. They said, "We're up front with you. The school district can't do it by itself. We own it too." This was very powerful and very unique. But there's more...

The "more" here is that after crafting the mission statement, the group of thirty-two helped develop ten core strategies and established working groups that wrote detailed action plans for each strategy. Each of the working groups included a diverse mix of parents, other individuals from the community and educators. In the end, eighty-four people were involved in writing the complete strategic plan, including the action components.

This is an uncommonly large number of people to be involved in a process which, in most other communities, is the domain of a small group of experts behind closed doors. When asked about the pros and cons of this approach, Dr. Ramos explained that

Change is messy, it's chaotic, it's...complex. Certainly this kind of change mechanism is all of these things, but the payoff is that instead of the superintendent and his cabinet sitting in the corner writing the plan...where the ownership is more limited, everybody owns this because everybody had something to say about this.

Distributed Leadership, Distributed Responsibility, Sustainable Policy

In theory, the result of this kind of broad-based ownership is greater stabilization of decision-making and more traction in efforts to improve things. Dr. Ramos feels that that's the course he's on: "What often happens," he explained, "particularly in urban settings, is that superintendents come and go...new people come in and a new agenda unfolds every two, three or five years, and when that happens it's very hard for districts to get traction and make progress on catching students up who are already behind."

By contrast, having the community built into the strategic planning process from the get-go means that the vision for the district does not live and die with each individual superintendent, and provides a kind of consistency of vision that can serve to bolster the district during times of stress and strife, or change.

A process like this that's owned by the community... hopefully would mean that, even if there's volatility in the superintendency, at least the mission, what's driving the district, doesn't change.

—John Ramos, Superintendent

In sum, rather than viewing the superintendent as a potential savior or failure, and the district as serving at the whim of the public, Bridgeport has created a culture of accountability in which citizens are partners of the educational environment, rather than simply clients or consumers.

Democracy is hard. It's easier to be autocratic, but I just don't believe that you get the same kind of commitment... If you're talking about the work that has to be long-term and deep-seated I believe that this approach is most effective.

—John Ramos, Superintendent



More Benefits for Kids

So far we've seen community members deliberating, organizations collaborating, businesses becoming civically involved, and a superintendent embracing the community's ethos of engagement, with much of this activity centered around education and youth issues. Here we examine some of the concrete practices and programs for young people that have emerged as a result, and we ask whether there is evidence suggesting that it is all leading to real benefits for kids.

Over the course of our interviews, we heard of numerous programs and activities aimed at helping students thrive and achieve that stemmed substantially from the engagement work. A sampling of these activities includes:

- Eight hundred individuals volunteered the day after a major education summit to go to the public schools and read to children.
- Fifty-one college mentors from area colleges worked one-on-one with 200 high school students.
- School leadership teams (which had been established several years earlier and then abandoned) were reinstated, giving parents a voice in school and after-school education policies.
- An anti-bullying policy was adopted and class size was lowered by the school system.

One example shows how the public, under good deliberative conditions, can resist the temptation for wishful thinking and make tough choices. It involves a series of Community Conversations run by the Lighthouse After-School Program on how to focus their efforts given the reality of shrinking resources. The general consensus of these sessions was that,

given limited resources, after-school activities should be focused on K-8 instead of providing after-school opportunities for high school students.

While Lighthouse leadership was surprised by this input, considering the community's level of concern about violence among older teens, they took it seriously. When the time came to make difficult decisions about which programs to cut, they focused on protecting and expanding the K-8 programs. According to Lighthouse director Tammy Papa, there are now 20 expanded K-8 after-school programs throughout the city.

While these projects and programs may have done many kids a great deal of good, do they actually amount to improved student achievement? While much remains to be done before anyone can claim that all children are being educated to their potential in Bridgeport, there is significant evidence that this work has had a positive impact on student success.

- In the year and a half following a major education summit, over 90% of kids who were matched with a mentor improved school attendance and grades in math and social studies.
- Five Bridgeport Schools recently have been removed from the list of poor performing schools due to increased student achievement.
- The City of Bridgeport was one of five finalists in both 2006 and 2007 for the Broad Foundation Prize for Urban Education. This prestigious national prize honors urban school districts that demonstrate the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among ethnic groups and between high- and low-income students.⁷

⁷ As a result of being nominated in 2006, fourteen Bridgeport students received college scholarships totaling \$125,000 from the Foundation.



In addition to the specific actions and initiatives we've highlighted, another factor may be at work in promoting these results. Harvard professor Robert Putnam has found that the presence of high levels of "social capital" correlates powerfully with high school graduation rates, SAT scores, and other indicators of educational success. "States where citizens meet, join, vote, and trust in unusual measure boast consistently higher educational performance than states where citizens are less engaged with civic and community life." Putnam's analysis finds that such engagement is "by far" a bigger indicator of educational outcomes than spending on education, teachers' salaries, class size or student socioeconomic status.⁸

In sum, it appears quite possible that specific initiatives emerging from, or invigorated by, public engagement and aimed at supporting the community's children may be having significant impacts on student achievement. Moreover, in light of Putnam's research it is also quite possible that the community's overall culture of engagement may be having a thousand small impacts on the ways people think and act that, taken together, are adding up to greater student success.

⁸ Robert D. Putnam, "Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance," in Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti, eds., *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 69-72.



III. Reflections

In this final section we examine the implications of Bridgeport’s civic story for students and practitioners of public engagement: What does it say about how the practices and ethos of engagement become embedded in the life of a community? What can it tell us about how to construct a theory of change that explains public engagement’s impacts? And what challenges remain in the evolution of Bridgeport’s culture of engagement?

How “Embeddedness” Happens

Fung and Fagotto suggest that a key to the process by which engagement becomes embedded is the “deliberative entrepreneur,” someone who recognizes the need for engagement in their community and who determinedly and creatively imports or creates it to meet that need. While we agree that such social entrepreneurship can be an extremely important dynamic in the appearance of new practices of engagement in a community, we wish to suggest important extensions of this conceptualization, extensions that we think are well illustrated in Bridgeport.

The Transition from “Entrepreneur” to “Maven”

First, we suggest that a factor that can contribute strongly to the embedding of deliberation within a community (as opposed to simply facilitating it temporarily) is the evolution of key actors from the role of deliberative entrepreneur to that of deliberative “*maven*”—people skilled and knowledgeable in the ways of deliberation who serve as an “information bank” and deliberative resource for the community.⁹ This appears to

be exactly the case for Marge Hiller and the BPEF (among others, such as Sonja Ahuja and Robert Francis). They began as importers of deliberation and became, over time, a catalyst and resource for further deliberative practices across the community.

This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the transition from entrepreneur to maven was also critical to the evolution of deliberation across Connecticut. In *Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut*, Will Friedman describes (in different language) how the Graustein Memorial Trust acted as a statewide deliberative entrepreneur by importing a model of public engagement to the state (via Public Agenda and IEL’s Community Conversations work on education). Graustein then created in-state deliberative “mavens” by asking Public Agenda to build the capacity of the Connecticut League of Women Voters (specifically, the tireless and highly skilled advocates for public engagement, Nancy Polk and Sonja Ahuja) to provide Community Conversations technical assistance for the state.¹⁰

The Design of Public Engagement Strategies and the Transition from Entrepreneur to Maven

If the existence of a deliberative entrepreneur is just the beginning of the story of “embedding” public engagement in a community, the question then becomes, how does the transition to “deliberative maven” occur and what facilitates it? How do entrepreneurs become forces who not only bring deliberation to a community, but inspire and support the emergence of other entrepreneurs who bring deliberation to their neighborhood or their specific concerns? What, in other words, are the factors that help entrepreneurs become mavens?

⁹ We borrow the maven concept from Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little, Brown, 2002). According to Gladwell, mavens, along with “connectors” and “salesmen” are the three types of individuals that play key roles in creating “social epidemics” that disseminate and plant new social ideas and practices. While we are not sold on Gladwell’s triptych as a complete theory of the spread of public engagement innovations, we do find the notion of mavens to be of use in our account of the embedding of deliberative practices. As Gladwell explains, “Mavens are really information brokers, sharing and trading what they know” (*The Tipping Point*, p. 69). In our view, individuals who serve as public engagement “information banks” are key to spreading, thickening, and deepening deliberative practices in the communities within their spheres of influence.

¹⁰ As a result of this statewide effort and evolution (as well as other factors, such as the fact that the Study Circles Resource Center is based in Connecticut and has also supported public engagement in the state), Connecticut quite possibly may be the most deliberatively engaged state in the nation—with Bridgeport likely being the most deliberatively engaged community within it.



One critical and under-appreciated factor, we believe, is the design of public engagement processes that the deliberative entrepreneur imports or creates. Our experience suggests that some models are more likely than others to allow entrepreneurs to become mavens, and thus to facilitate the embedding of public engagement. A key question here is, How user-friendly is a particular public engagement model? Is it easy for local entrepreneurs to master it quickly, adapt it to their needs, and make it their own, or not?¹¹

We believe that engagement models vary significantly on this dimension. Some (such as Public Agenda's Community Conversations or the small-group dialogue model of the organization Study Circles) are relatively simple and inexpensive and, therefore, relatively easy to transfer to local community leadership. Other engagement models and strategies can be rather more complex and expensive to implement. Such approaches may well have a number of virtues and strengths, but being easily transferable to local communities is not one of them.¹²

Toward a Deliberative Democratic Theory of Change

We have argued elsewhere that the significance of public engagement can be seen in two interrelated dimensions of the process of change. First, there are specific, concrete changes in policy, institutional practices, and the like that flow directly from the initiatives and collaborations created or renewed by a specific public engagement process. Second, there is a broader, ongoing process of transformation of a community's culture of problem-solving that we capture via John Dewey's concept of "social intelligence."¹³

Bridgeport illustrates both of these dimensions and their interrelationship extremely well. There are all sorts of examples of concrete initiatives (such as those described earlier under the heading, "More Benefits for Kids") that have changed how resources are allocated, individuals behave and institutions function. And there is the broader, more general pattern of a more inclusive and effective problem-solving culture in the community that people spoke of again and again: "The language becomes everybody's language. Everybody knows what a Community Conversation is." "It makes bad political sense to do 'top-down' stuff in Bridgeport." "Democracy is hard. It's easier to be autocratic, but I just don't believe that you get the same kind of commitment." And so on.

Finally, in Bridgeport, one can see how these two dimensions of change are really parts of a single process of civic development. That is,

Social intelligence and concrete problem-solving are... two dimensions of the same process of deliberative democratic impact and change. Citizens typically get drawn into processes of deliberative engagement because they want a real voice in addressing tangible problems facing their communities. Once so engaged they often find the experience of well-designed deliberation intrinsically satisfying and stimulating. At this point our two dimensions of change can become highly reinforcing in a kind of virtuous cycle: as an intrinsically stimulating democratic involvement that also helps address concrete public problems makes people want to stay engaged, their democratic capacities develop (they become better at it), social intelligence evolves, and the process becomes at once more satisfying, stimulating, effective and meaningful.¹⁴

¹¹ Fung and Fagotto (2006) did not address the nature of the model of engagement that was being embedded in a community, and concentrated instead on the deliberative "entrepreneur" as "catalysts" of "embeddedness." We believe that further analyses will benefit from factoring in the variable of design. For more discussion on the importance of deliberative democratic design, see Kadlec and Friedman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power," *Journal of Public Deliberation*, Volume 3, 2007.

¹² For a related discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of various models, see Will Friedman's "Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Scope," *Journal of Public Deliberation*, Volume 2, 2006. Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) is currently working on a further analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of different engagement models (forthcoming).

¹³ See Kadlec and Friedman's "Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power" for a more detailed and developed discussion of these two dimensions of deliberative democratic change.

¹⁴ Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 23.



This is, of course, no more than the *start* of a theory of change that can explain public engagement’s impacts, and help justify the considerable efforts required to create it. Communities like Bridgeport, where the work of public engagement has been long-term and multi-layered, offer rare opportunities to make headway on the question of how engagement leads to change.

There’s a lot to be done, and I think that everybody recognizes we’re [taking] baby steps.
—Adrienne Houel, ABCD

Challenges Remain, Despite the Gains

While Bridgeport’s decade of public engagement has had significant impacts, challenges remain. In particular, people spoke of wanting to make the efforts even more inclusive and of leveraging engagement processes to produce even greater impacts.

Pursuing the Ideal of Inclusion

As impressive as engagement efforts in Bridgeport have been in including citizens in public problem-solving, even greater inclusiveness remains a challenge and an aspiration.

Thus far, Bridgeport’s engagement organizers appear to have been remarkably successful in engaging many lower-income and working-class individuals, but less so in their attempts to include those who are frankly poor, especially recent immigrants. As one community organizer explained,

Our public here in Bridgeport are generally folks who are working couple of jobs. They are on the limit of poverty...I’m pretty much convinced that it’s not until people get just above [the poverty line] that they start really [getting engaged]. We have a large, large immigration population that does not attend any of these [community events].
—Adrienne Houel, ABCD

That many engaged members of the community are often working a “couple of jobs” and barely above the poverty line suggests that time is not in itself a decisive factor in determining participation. Instead, feeling as though one has “a dog in the fight” seems to be at least as important a factor as time for these individuals.

They need to be sure that [they’re] really a part of this community. You [need to] really feel that you’re a citizen of this community [in order for it to be worth your time].
—Adrienne Houel, ABCD

While the challenge of greater inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups is a perennial one, this is not the only challenge. On the other side are those individuals who might be considered solidly middle-class. As one business leader explained it,

In Bridgeport’s case, you know, the guy that lives in the north end in a three-bedroom cape and is working hard to put his kids through school, he’s not [typically engaged]. We need more of those people.
—Paul Timpanelli, President and CEO, BRBC

Here the explanation for low participation appears to have less to do with alienation from the community than with complacency, as well as with cynicism about politics of any kind.

They are just too busy for this sort of thing because they, frankly, don’t have a lot of patience for what they call “the political world.”
—Paul Timpanelli, President and CEO, BRBC

What such comments suggest is that, despite their successes, Bridgeport’s organizers have important work remaining to catalyze the energies of the entire citizenry in public problem-solving. At the same time, the fact that it bothers community and business leaders that people are “missing from the conversation” is important in and of itself as an indicator that norms of deliberative democracy are taking root.

Pursuing Ever Greater Impacts

In addition to expanding the scope of inclusion, Bridgeport's community leaders are most interested in improving their capacity to leverage greater change from the engagement process.

One of the great challenges of public engagement work is that the pace of change is often slow, with gains being made in increments rather than leaps. Earlier we discussed how business leaders accustomed to more autocratic modes of decision-making were often impatient with the processes of community engagement, and have only recently begun to appreciate its virtues. The same is true of many grassroots activists, many of whom are more oriented to mobilizing citizens around a predetermined agenda than to engaging citizens on the agenda itself, and who tend to be impatient with what can feel to them like just a lot of "talk." As one community activist said,

We don't do anything that doesn't involve community mobilization...but the community mobilization always happens because there is already a task force that has already decided, "Here is the change we want. Now we're going to mobilize our community and advocate for that change." It doesn't happen because it's a nice topic to talk about.

For those who feel that they already know the solutions to the problems, engaging citizens in a discussion about the nature of the problems may seem like a waste of time. While experience tells us that it is much more difficult to sustain solutions that have not been generated in significant degree by the people suffering from the problems themselves, public engagement practitioners agree that one of the great dangers of engagement is that momentum may flag as citizens try to move from naming problems to working together to address those problems with specific, concrete actions.

When people come out of the Community Conversations, they feel really energized. They feel like they've done something. It's important to somehow capitalize on that, but it's really difficult to do that.

—Sonja Ahuja, Project Manager, LWVCT Education Fund

The only thing that's ever been discouraging about any of this is that sometimes you have really great information that no one uses.

—Marge Hiller, Executive Director, BPEF

Despite their successes, then, dissatisfaction remains with respect to inclusion and impact among Bridgeport's deliberative "entrepreneurs" and "mavens." This bodes well, we think, for the next ten years of public deliberation in Bridgeport, as those who have worked so hard to embed engagement continue to look for ways to make it ever more meaningful. The fate of these ongoing efforts to transform public life in this hard-pressed community will be worth watching. ❖❖

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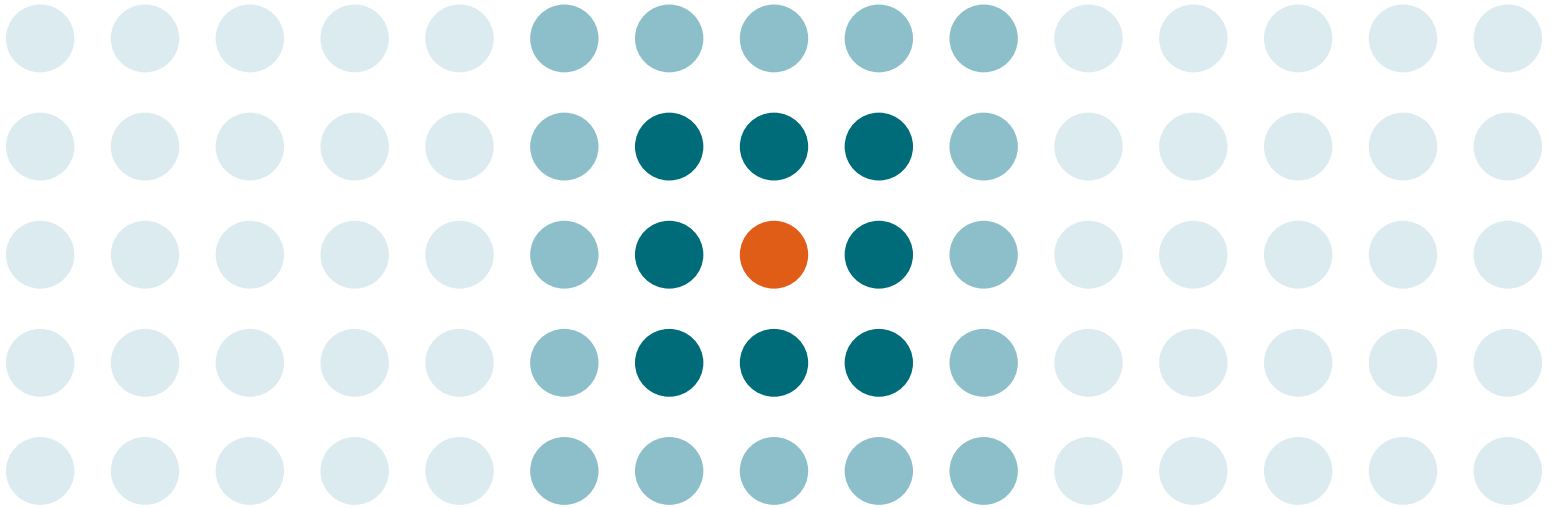
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