Community engagement in education is widely recognized as a vital force in the effort to remove barriers to achieving quality education for all. Governments are increasingly recognizing the value of working with communities and sharing responsibility for, and ownership of, education systems. Countries with concerted alliances among government, communities, and international partners have made great strides. Communities have contributed greatly to improving school systems through addressing issues of access to education, educational quality, and safety and security.

Although generalized problems can be identified externally (i.e., low school enrollment), it is a community's engagement in reflective analysis of its particular situation that leads to locally generated, locally viable, long-term solutions. For example, where traditional practices or beliefs prevent marginalized populations, particularly girls, from attaining education, government mandates alone are not enough to remove these barriers. Communities themselves must address the underlying factors that are preventing children from accessing education and develop solutions that are relevant to their particular situation. Additionally, the multiplicity of crises around the world, both natural and human-made, has interrupted schooling for millions. Reestablishing schooling in these settings and helping establish a sense of normalcy often fall on the shoulders of the community.
Successful engagement empowers communities to participate in multiple facets of education support. Community involvement in school management has shown to increase accountability for both learning outcomes and school resources; involvement in curriculum development, which ensures the cultural relevance of subject content and teaching styles, leads to a wider embrace of the educational process. Community engagement also fosters the willing contribution of local resources (human, material, and economic) for the benefit of education. Community ownership of education initiatives endows such initiatives with a greater likelihood of being successful and of being sustained over time.

Community participation in education is a sustainable way to increase resources, improve the accountability of schools to the communities they serve, ensure a more cost-effective use of resources, and be responsive to local needs. As a result, it intends to improve equitable access, retention, quality, and performance of schooling.
1. **Trust is established and maintained.**

Establishing and maintaining trust is the foundation of all productive, mutually beneficial relationships. The importance of trust applies to all parties engaged in the school environment, including trust between external parties and the community and between community representatives and community members at large. Staff of the New Schools Project in Egypt, for example, found that trust developed through concrete actions and was fostered when community members saw that their ideas and concerns had not only been listened to but also acted upon. Thus, trust is engendered when there is demonstrated credibility and transparency in all stages of the development of the relationship. Credibility is best established through clear communication, regular consultation, and reliable follow-through. Transparency includes being open about intentions and motivations as well as processes and resources.

2. **Education initiatives are community driven and led.**

Efforts to improve the school environment that arise from, and are led by, communities themselves have been shown to lead to genuine ownership and long-term sustainability. An external party can often assist a community in recognizing its options or opportunities to improve educational quality. This assistance is most effective, however, when the party serves only as facilitator and is not perceived as controlling the process or being directive. The most successful partnerships include community members’ participation in all aspects of school improvement: assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. During participatory assessments conducted in communities where CARE was working in Afghanistan, 20 of the 38 communities ranked education as one of their top three priorities. Community schools were established in response to a community-identified priority, and this process is credited with the degree to which many communities have taken responsibility for their schools.

3. **Partnerships to increase educational access and quality are inclusive.**

In an inclusive partnership, the partners actively seek to involve all groups in the community, with a particular emphasis on the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups, such as ethnic or religious minorities, refugees, or those living with HIV/AIDS. Although any education initiative naturally seeks to involve parents, other community members are sometimes forgotten. Community members who are not necessarily parents (e.g., religious leaders, youth, private-sector representatives) can be beneficially engaged in education efforts. Genuine inclusion and participation provide substantive, meaningful opportunities that are not merely representational. This type of inclusion not only increases support for the educational initiative but also can have an impact on the

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**About The First Principles**

This *First Principles: Community Engagement in Education Programs Digest* provides an overview and guidance for designing and implementing education programs through the active involvement of communities. The principles, steps, and indicators are primarily meant to guide program designs, including the development of requests for and subsequent review of proposals, the implementation of program activities, and the development of performance management plans, evaluations, and research studies. The First Principles are intended to help USAID education officers specifically, as well as other stakeholders—including staff in donor agencies, government officials, and staff working for international and national nongovernmental organizations—who endeavor to improve education by engaging communities. The guidance in this document is meant to be used and adapted for a variety of settings to help USAID officers, educators, and implementers grapple with the multiple dimensions of professional development and overcome the numerous challenges in mobilizing and meaningfully involving communities in supporting education. The last section provides references for those who would like to learn more about issues and methods for engaging the community in education programming. This *Digest* version is a brief overview of the key considerations when engaging communities in education. For those who are interested in knowing more, a longer companion piece called a *Compendium* provides greater depth on this topic.
environment in which children live, often transforming attitudes about schooling and increasing opportunities for previously excluded groups.

4. **Cooperation with local government is sought and sustained to enhance program sustainability.**

The long-term sustainability of educational improvements often depends on the cooperation of local leaders. Coordination with local government and community leaders, as well as with other implementing agencies operating in the area, can ensure continuity and avoid perceived conflicts with other initiatives in the same community. Including local government representatives in training opportunities can facilitate their recognition of the viable role of the community in promoting not only educational quality but also other development needs of the community. In Guinea, the inclusion of local officials was identified as a key element to the success of the parent associations. Parents learned to see themselves as partners with the school administration, traditional/religious leaders, rural development councils, and locally elected officials.

5. **The relationship between parties is equitable.**

The parties seek to engage in a genuine partnership for the common good, where neither seeks to use the other for its advantage. Opinions, insights, solutions, and criticisms are sought, respected, and acted upon. This can be a special challenge in schools because power structures are highly connected to those who are better educated (e.g., school personnel, government officials, nongovernmental organization workers, certain community leaders) and less so to those who are illiterate (e.g., first-generation learners and their families). To avoid falling back to local power structures, it is important to clearly assess how different actors will exercise influence and decision making. For example, in Afghanistan, CARE entered into formal agreements with communities seeking to establish community schools. These agreements clearly defined the roles of each party. Village Education Committees (VECs) agreed to provide school space, manage teacher selection and payment, resolve school problems with the community and local authorities, and implement a monitoring and evaluation system. CARE agreed to provide training to VECs and local teachers, supply classroom materials to students and teachers, and offer additional management support. These agreements are noted as another of the success factors of the community schools because they established an equitable, balanced partnership.

6. **Capacity development enables community members to take on greater levels of responsibility.**

Capacity development gives community members opportunities to augment their existing skills and acquire the new skills and increased confidence needed to participate, plan, manage, and evaluate. Capacity development includes training in specific skills such as participatory planning, project design and management, financial management, educational quality and supervision, and literacy and numeracy. Training for school administrators and local leaders can help them recognize the value of community participation. Ongoing mentorship reinforces and consolidates the use of the newly learned skills. The transfer of skills within the community itself is necessary to strengthen the pool of human resources and ensure long-term sustainability. An example of the successful application of newly learned skills comes from Ghana, where conflict resolution training was a component of the capacity-building program. One community was able to use newly learned skills to resolve a conflict it had with a nearby community about a school, which resulted in the children from that neighbor community being allowed to attend the school.

7. **Flexibility in approach allows adaptation to local context.**

Communities are organic entities and differ widely. Community engagement in education will take different forms depending on the specific circumstances, needs, beliefs, goals, and so on, of a particular community. In rural Egypt and Afghanistan, for example, strongly held attitudes about gender segregation in education constitute one of the most challenging issues. Flexibility in classroom arrangements from one community to another, such as providing separate shifts or girls-only classrooms, made it possible to establish education for girls where previously there had been strong resistance. Flexibility also allows a community’s plans to be adapted to fit a change of circumstances within that community, particularly in the case of emergencies. This principle is closely tied to Principle 2.
8. **Genuine community ownership of education initiatives requires long-term commitment.**

Experience has shown that most changes to education systems and schools are processes that need to be consolidated over time. This is particularly true when the changes are behavioral or attitudinal. Evidence shows that the effect over time is greatly diminished when engagements are of short duration for a specific objective. Every community and situation is different, and there are too many variables to offer a generalized timeline. Variables include community demand for quality education, the community's history with previous initiatives (either positive or negative), the ability to establish genuine trust, the commitment of government and local leaders to follow through, and the levels of education and experience of the human resources within the community. Seeking out partners who have engaged with communities in a specific context and have local knowledge is invaluable in establishing realistic timelines for specific initiatives.
Steps for Effective Community Engagement

The following section describes five steps to operationalize the key principles and engage in meaningful partnerships with communities around education initiatives.

1. **Conduct a participatory assessment of current situations, attitudes, concerns, opportunities, and aspirations related to education.**

   A participatory assessment guides a community in the analysis of its current situation. The results of the analysis not only reflect immediate concerns in the school environment but also can identify broader challenges that may be the underlying causes of problems. A variety of tools are available to guide the analysis and reflect diverse issues: enrollment and attendance, quality of the learning environment, engagement of caretakers and school personnel, education funding, and treatment of gender in the classroom, among others. Several sources for these tools are presented at the end of this digest. The selection of specific tools will depend on the stated purpose of the assessment. Adaptations should be made, as necessary, to ensure that the tool is appropriate for the local context. Employing more than one tool or method is often necessary to ensure the full participation of community members. In some communities, an open meeting may be appropriate; in others, smaller focus groups with separate genders, age groups, and ethnic or religious minorities may provide the spaces needed for otherwise marginalized perspectives to be heard. The principle of “Do no harm” is also important when engaging with communities in an exploratory process, particularly one that seeks to draw out traditionally excluded groups. It is advisable to engage the expertise of partners who have experience in participatory assessments in both selecting tools and conducting the assessment.

2. **Strengthen or form formalized structures for engagement.**

   Once an assessment is complete, a formalized structure must be identified for taking action on the results. The type of structure required will be determined by the overall outcome or level of engagement anticipated. Coordinating a campaign to encourage parents to send their daughters to school, for example, requires a different type of organization than establishing or managing a school. Where identified primary concerns focus specifically on a local school, either problems with an existing school or the lack thereof, a school management committee (SMC) or a parent-teacher association (PTA) may be the most effective structure for engagement. However, if the Ministry of Education already has a formally recognized community-level mechanism, it should be engaged and strengthened. Any new structure should have the approval of the community and make every effort to develop a good working relationship with local government or leadership. In some cases, existing structures are ineffective or reinforce entrenched power dynamics in communities. If the community is amenable, an existing body can be restructured to better reflect the makeup of the community. For example, a PTA that was previously appointed can be democratically elected. Criteria should be adopted to ensure that its members reflect the makeup of the community, including women and other traditionally excluded groups.

3. **Assist school management committees, parent-teacher associations, or other coordinating bodies in setting goals and developing plans.**

   The members of the formal structure should be assisted as necessary in formulating a plan based on the input received from the community. Such plans are known by various names, such as school improvement plan (SIP), school performance improvement plan (SPIP), or local education action plan (LEAP), depending on the focus. All plans should include specific objectives, activities to meet those objectives, benchmarks or indicators of success, a breakdown of tasks and persons responsible, a timetable for implementation, and a budget. The complexity of the plan will depend on the community’s experience and goals. Plans may include a variety of educational activities, depending on the community’s identified needs and aspirations, such as ensuring school attendance, monitoring teacher performance, or building new facilities. The budget should include financial, material, and human resources. This is particularly important in impoverished communities because it acknowledges the importance of both in-kind and monetary contributions. Capacity building will be necessary in most cases to assist communities in implementing their plans. Specific capacity-building needs should be included in the plan, and the plan should be presented to the community for feedback and revised as necessary.
Experience in a variety of settings has shown that efforts are more sustainable when they start small, are concrete, and are doable without outside financial resources. When communities organize specifically around an opportunity to leverage external funding, the commitment may dissipate once the funding is no longer available. That being said, it is also clear that a lack of resources is a real barrier, and small grants to local communities have contributed significantly to school improvement efforts. These grants are most effective when they are built into a multiyear engagement, are distributed no sooner than the second year, and are contingent on a demonstrated commitment on the part of the community through matching contributions of local resources and participation in capacity-building programs. Waiting at least 1 year before introducing grants provides the time needed for necessary planning and financial management skills to be learned and also helps discourage opportunists who may be eager to participate in an initiative if there is perceived monetary gain from the beginning.

4. **Build capacity to strengthen community-level human resources.**

In communities with limited experience in implementing education initiatives, capacity development will be required to assist members in acquiring the skills and confidence they will need to participate, plan, manage, and evaluate. Capacity development will take different forms, including formal training, experiential learning gained from participation in processes, and mentoring. Training should be provided not only to those who serve as members of the formal implementing body (PTA, SMC, etc.) but also to other interested community members, especially those who are underrepresented in leadership, such as women, youth, and ethnic or religious minorities. Expanding the range of participants to those traditionally excluded may require providing initial literacy and numeracy training to facilitate their fuller participation in other training opportunities. The goal of all capacity-development activities should be to build a pool of human resources for the community to draw on in the long term.

Specific capacity-development needs should be identified early and be part of the community plan. This process should include identifying the existing skills of individuals in the community as well as areas of need. Depending on the specific needs, training can include, but not be limited to, participatory planning, project design and management, financial management, and educational quality and supervision. Training is also important for school administrators and local leaders who may not initially see the value of community participation and may feel threatened by it or think it is a waste of time. Ongoing mentorship reinforces and consolidates the use of the newly learned skills. Wherever possible, mentors from within the community should be sought out and engaged in the process. Transferring skills within the community itself can guard against consolidating newly learned skills in only a few individuals and thus make long-term sustainability more likely.

5. **Conduct continuous monitoring and follow-up.**

Regular monitoring should be an ongoing, integral component of any education initiative and should be budgeted for from the outset. Successful projects ensure adequate resources for regular visits to schools by appropriate staff and dignitaries. Benchmarks or indicators of success should be included in the initial plan. This important aspect of transparency can help community members understand that it is not individuals who are being monitored, but rather the implementation of the plan and its outcomes. Monitoring should be done not only of progress toward completion of educational improvements listed in the plan but also of the process of community engagement itself. Periodic monitoring can provide opportunities to modify the plan if benchmarks are not being met or circumstances change. School breaks often are natural opportunities for celebrations of successes that can help sustain motivation and lead to progressively greater engagement by larger numbers of people and in more substantive ways.
As with any programming area, challenges and limitations must be overcome or worked around. It is impossible to anticipate all the challenges that may be encountered, but some of the more common ones are discussed in this section.

1. Traditional exclusion of some groups

Traditional exclusion of some groups (women, minorities, youth, children) often limits their freedom to participate in community-wide initiatives. Ingrained prejudicial attitudes toward marginalized groups can manifest themselves through a reluctance to include and work together with them and to value their contributions. To counteract these barriers, quotas for representation on the formal bodies (PTA, SMC, etc.) may be implemented initially, until the value to the community of full participation is recognized. Training in participatory processes as part of the capacity-building plan can develop an awareness of the difference between genuine participation and tokenism. Ongoing mentorship can provide a means to monitor participation.

2. Entrenched power structures

Many communities have entrenched power structures, including at schools, which are often characterized by authoritarianism, corruption, and a lack of transparency. On the one hand, local leaders may be reluctant to share power and may try to direct the process of community engagement by designating who is to be involved, assigning roles, and so on. On the other hand, strong community leaders can be a great influence for committing local resources and increasing participation in support of education. Involving local leaders in the participatory assessment process can help generate their buy-in and support and also make them more accountable to community members. Formalizing each party’s role in the partnership with specific criteria in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other form of written agreement provides clear expectations and a point of agreement to refer back to when needed. These agreements should be made public in various forms that are accessible to illiterate community members as well (i.e., read aloud, illustrated on posters), so that a sense of accountability to the community is fostered. Fulfillment of each party’s commitments in the agreement should be part of the ongoing monitoring process.

3. Learned helplessness/apathy

Communities that have been continual recipients of direct humanitarian aid either from external agencies (religious, humanitarian, governmental) or their own government or leaders, or who have been shut out completely, sometimes develop a learned helplessness or apathy regarding taking initiative to resolve community problems. Such issues are more prevalent in communities where school supplies, uniforms, or infrastructure improvements have been traditionally provided by the government or nongovernmental organizations. This view can manifest itself in the attitude that “if we just wait, someone will come and take care of us” or in a fatalistic position of just accepting the situation as it is. In such cases, it is advisable to seek out and engage key players or champions of education who are willing to take initiative and who can win over others in the community. The participatory assessment process can foster participants’ awareness that they have the right to ask questions, seek information, and be involved in decision making. It can also be a catalyst for community members to realize, or be reminded of, what they are capable of.

4. Contributors to sustained poverty that may initially limit participation

Illiteracy, lack of economic or material resources, and ill health are among the contributors to sustained poverty that can limit community members’ participation in community-wide initiatives. When individuals are focused on day-to-day survival, it is difficult to set aside the time, energy, or resources needed for engaging in long-term plans, even if the desire and an understanding of the needs are present. As communities become more skillful in addressing challenges, these more-complex barriers can also be addressed, leading to full participation.
5. Parental reluctance stemming from cultural attitudes and safety concerns

Many rural families do not see the relevance of education to their lives. There is no obvious need within the household for children, particularly girls, to know how to read or write or acquire other knowledge that schooling provides. If parents do not see the value of attending school, and if the quality of the education available is poor, more immediate demands, such as the need for children to contribute financially or through labor to the household, take priority. Additionally, physical risks, especially for girls, are a real concern, especially when the nearest school is several kilometers away. The risks are not only in the daily journey but also often from teachers or older boys at the school. Even where the actual danger of abuse is slight, cultural values of propriety prevent girls from traveling unescorted far from home. Allowing parental input into the curriculum and the school calendar has been shown to effectively address the concerns about both relevance and scheduling around household chores.

6. Participation that occurs in small steps initially and that cannot be rushed to fit external goals

Cultivating partnerships takes time, particularly in the early stages. Communities with limited or no experience in implementing development initiatives are likely to see their involvement in education as associated with a specific, finite project. Creating a clear plan of action with opportunities to celebrate success along the way provides encouragement, sustains motivation, and helps develop a sense of ownership and pride in the results. Through their engagement in a series of small projects, community members begin to see how they can have a more central role in supporting education over the long term.
The overall goal of community engagement in education is to increase access to quality education for all children, particularly girls and other marginalized groups. Specific indicators of success will be contextual and will depend on the specific objectives set out in a community’s plan, which will vary depending on the level of community commitment. However, general clusters of indicators are common to most community education initiatives. These indicators can be divided into two categories, those whose results can be measured in a short period of time and those whose impact takes more time to become evident and measurable. Outcomes should be disaggregated to ensure that the assessment of progress is targeted and not too general, particularly for girls and other traditionally excluded groups.

**Short-Term Indicators**

Parents and other community members are more involved in school activities and support of the school.

- More parents and other community members attend school functions.
- More parents and other community members provide material or economic support for school needs.
- More parents and other community members contribute their time or labor for school projects.
- More parents and other community members ensure that children attend school regularly.

Teachers and school administrators recognize the value of community involvement.

- Teachers and school administrators give anecdotal accounts of the benefits of community involvement in schools.
- Teachers and school administrators actively solicit the involvement of parents and other community members.

Parents and other community members recognize the value of community involvement.

- Parents and other community members give anecdotal accounts of the benefits of their involvement in school.

**Longer-Term Indicators**

School enrollment, retention, and completion rates increase, particularly for previously marginalized groups.

- More children are enrolled and attend school regularly.
- More children complete their basic education.

The community is empowered to ensure that schools and the educational system are functioning effectively.

- Community members make informed choices about the resource needs of their schools.
- Community members play an active role in the maintenance and upkeep of school facilities and infrastructure.
- Community members are engaged in evaluating the effective use of school resources.
- Community members have input into the educational processes that affect learning outcomes.
- Community members are actively engaged in monitoring learning outcomes and educational practices.
- Educational quality is improved.
- Teachers are in classrooms during school hours and actively teaching.
- Student learning is increasing, as measured by determined national/regional or project learning outcome indicators.
- Students’ attitudes about education are more positive.
- Community members’ attitudes about the importance of education are more positive.
- Community members’ opinions of the effectiveness of their local school are more positive.
Essential Reading


First Principles: Community Engagement in Education Programs is part of a series called First Principles, which provides guidance for programming in a range of topics in education and development. Topics in the series include:

- Community Engagement
- Early Childhood Development
- Gender
- In-Service Teacher Professional Development
- School Health
- Standards and Assessment
- Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development
- Education for Underserved Populations
- ICT in Education
- Pre-service Teacher Education
- School Management and Leadership Development

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