

The Champion Local school board: Roger L. Samuelson, Maurreen Seafert, Larry Dutch, Amy Schwab and Laurie-Jo Miller.



Reaching out for success

by Angela Penquite
assistant editor

Champion Local's (Trumbull) plan for including community input into its strategic planning process earned the district an honorable mention from the *American School Board Journal* 2007 Magna Awards program. By listening to stakeholders — students, parents and community — the district meets the needs of its students and strengthens its relationship with the northeastern Ohio community.

"We applied for the Magna Award because we feel so strongly about the importance of community engagement," board member Laurie-Jo Miller said.

"By sharing our successes and experiences, other districts could leverage those ideas and enhance their program."

Those successes include increasing communication with the community through a district newsletter, adding courses at the request of students and parents, and rewarding school and community volunteers and senior citizens.

"This is all part of the plan to communicate with the community and get them involved in what we do here,"

board member Roger L. Samuelson said. "We have an enormous group who do not have kids in school, so we try things to bring them back into the schools."

"People ask, 'How do you get more information out to your community members? How do you develop this relationship with the schools and the community and the trustees and the elderly?'" board member Amy Schwab said. The board attended a presentation at the 2004

Capital Conference that answered these questions and started the process to improve communication.



The value of statistically valid information

The Champion school board has incorporated community input into the district's strategic planning for over a decade. Working with nearby Kent State University Trumbull Campus, the board held focus groups to gather community opinions on the school district in 1995. Kent State personnel conducted the sessions and compiled the results, which were used in the district's first strategic plan. In 2005, the board again asked community members for their perceptions of the school district and what they wanted for the schools in the future.

"Through OSBA, we contracted with **Don Miller** of Don Miller & Associates to create a telephone survey," said **Larry Durch**, board president. "Don met with the board, we picked the process we wanted and reviewed the questions we wanted to ask."

Fifteen hundred postcards were sent to local residents, asking for their participation in the phone survey. Volunteers from the Rotary Club of Champion, Kent State and the Trumbull Career & Technical Center placed over 1,000 phone calls, resulting in 300 valid surveys. The surveys were tallied and Miller reported the results to the board.

"One of the biggest surprises was that

almost 76% of the people surveyed don't have kids in school," Durch said. "The other surprising question was where do you get most of your information from the school and who do you trust: the teachers. It was very, very interesting."

"The survey has been such a value to us," Superintendent **Pamela Hood** said. "We've incorporated it into strategic planning, we made program changes because of it and it's a way to validate statistically what you think are the perceptions, whether they're true or not."

"The survey gave us direction," Durch said. "We implemented the survey into our strategic plan and worked toward those goals."

Meeting with stakeholders

Part of the strategic plan included expanding community opportunities for input. The board wanted to meet its stakeholders in an intimate setting,

where those involved would feel comfortable opening up and freely giving opinions.

The board and school administrators meet with parents, students and community members in three different settings. School administrators and Hood meet with parents for "coffee talks." Each building principal — elementary,



Roger L. Samuelson, a 16-year school board member, explains how the district works to get community members involved in the schools.

middle and high school — recruits four parents each year to host the meetings in their homes. The host invites five or six additional parents to participate. At the coffee talk, the principal gives an overview of the school, then parents can ask any questions they have.

"They (the parents) are on their turf, so they respond differently than they would at the school," said board member **Maureen Seafert**. "The administrators don't know what kind of questions or suggestions to expect, so they have to be prepared there. And it's excellent."

During the coffee talk, Hood takes minutes of the discussion, and later follows up on any questions that need to be researched. She sends the answers to all the parents involved with that talk.

"At the end of the year, the superintendent and principals meet and review all the minutes to assess if they have addressed the issues brought up in the talks," Seafert said. "It is great for accountability."

The student dialog sessions are held in the schools. Instead of the superintendent and a principal, each board member meets with five to seven



Larry Durch discusses the value of conducting a community survey, as fellow board member Maureen Seafert listens.



The Rotary Club of Champion helps with the 1,000 telephone calls necessary for a community survey. Rotary members include, from left, Pete Kringeta, Anita McGrath, former Champion Local board member Barb Ames and Jack Bronson.

students. The board members ask a series of open-ended questions and record the students' responses. After each group is finished, the minutes are reviewed by all of the board members.

"We ask about academics, school safety and how they feel about technology," Schwab said. "We write out all of their responses, tally it and share it with our administrators. It's been very positive with the students, because they feel like they're being a part of everything, especially academics. If we implement a different English class, they realize we really are listening to them."

Board members host dialog sessions with community business leaders, also conducted in the schools, in the same format as the student dialog sessions.

"We ask those leaders the same kind of questions: Do you have any concerns? What would you like to hear more about our schools or where do you get your info about our schools?" Schwab said. "It's amazing that everything we pull together comes from what our community wants. We're really building a tight community."

Benefits for the classroom *and* the community

New classes that better suit students' needs resulted from the coffee talks and dialog sessions. New advanced science

and English courses were added to the curriculum at the request of high school students.

Parents, concerned about their children's readiness for college, also requested new courses.

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"They wanted to know if we could offer ACT preparation courses, and writing courses for helping with college applications and essays and scholarship applications," Seafert said. "So we've done that. They're teaching how and where to apply, so the students are better prepared when they want to go to college. It's a specific elective at the sophomore/junior level."

"One of the survey questions was, 'Which of the following ways do you like to receive information?'" Hood said. "School district publications was 67%, so we started the district newsletter."

The district now mails a newsletter to all Champion residents three times a year, ensuring accurate information about the schools is received throughout the mostly rural district.

Board members are seeing other changes in the community based on the district's outreach program. People who may not have interacted before are now meeting in dialog sessions or parent coffee talks. They also are participating more in the schools.

"Community members didn't know that they could come in and read to the elementary kids, so they're really getting more involved," Schwab said. "Parents are forming a lot of groups as well, just from getting to know others. It's a great learning experience for all of them."

The board has four additional programs in the works and looks for ways to show how each member of the community plays an important role in the schools. In conjunction with the Rotary Club of Champion, the board hosted an appreciation luncheon for senior citizens in late October and presented the Champion Senior Citizen of the Year Award.

"We also have a volunteer breakfast, which is another group of people we want to thank," Laurie-Jo Miller said. "It keeps people enthused about the things they are doing for the school, keeps them at the heart of the team and shows them we're very appreciative."

National recognition

The district found its efforts validated when it was honored by the Magna Award program. The program recognizes districts nationwide for outstanding projects that advance student learning and promote community involvement in schools.

"We're very proud of our accomplishment in this area," board member Miller said. "We're most pleased by the partnership we've formed with our community, our business leaders and our parents, and recognize what a powerful thing this is for our district. The community members are engaged; they feel like they're part of the team." □