



# MESA PUBLIC SCHOOLS CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE SCAN and RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING PUBLIC MEETINGS AND ENGAGEMENT

**2024**



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Report produced for the ‘Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings project’, funded by the AAA-ICDR Foundation

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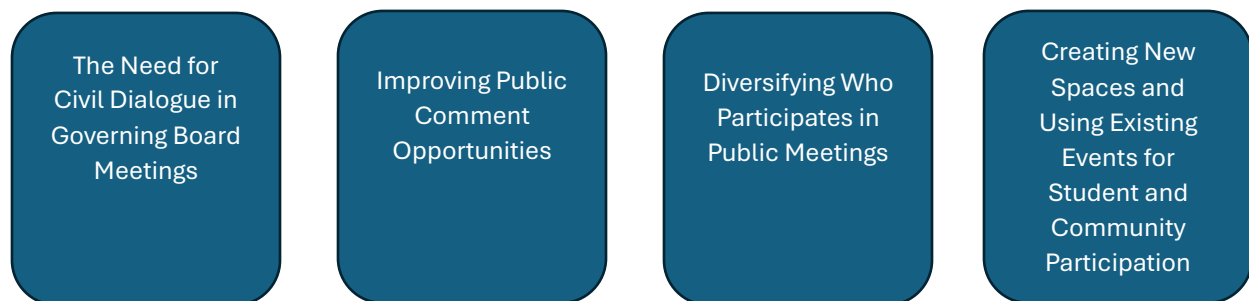
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## Executive Summary

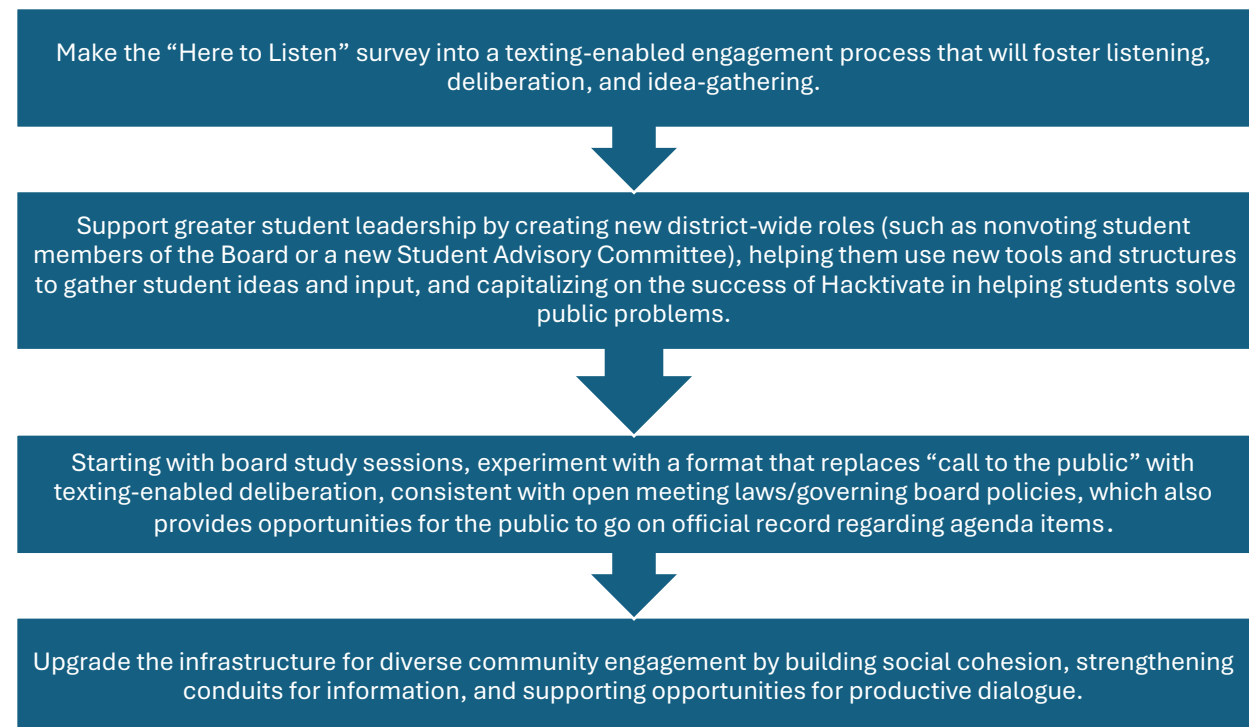
Over the last few months, the Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League has been working to help Mesa Public School leaders take stock of the local civic context and consider options for improving public meetings, and public engagement generally, in the city.

To accomplish these goals, we have conducted a **Civic Infrastructure Scan** to explore the recent history of engagement, assets and capacities present in the community, demographic shifts, and the state of democracy in civic associations and digital networks. We also fielded a local version of the Center's **Civic Engagement Scorecard** to provide an ongoing source of data on resident attitudes toward meetings and the community generally. Finally, we are providing a **set of recommendations** on strategies and tools to use before, during, and after official public meetings.

Four themes emerged from the Scan, Scorecard, and conversations with Mesa officials and staff:



Based on these themes, our recommendations include:



Democratic innovations can improve both the official public meetings themselves and the activities that funnel ideas to those meetings. We suggest some form of sequencing of smaller roundtable discussions starting first within the community (perhaps with the Parent Council, Student Advisory Board, etc.), to hosting issue-specific design-thinking Hacktivate sessions supported by civic technology, informal pop-ups at local arts venues/events, all of which will lead into official study sessions (and later Regular Board meetings/session) involving conversations between elected officials and the public. In this way, the end point of an official public comment/call to the public session is not the focal point, but rather everything leading into these official settings, and then involving newly designed spaces for better public conversation at these meetings.

We've found a much broader interpretation of where and what type of public participation is required within official settings. Public meetings can consist of smaller roundtable discussions involving collective deliberation rather than strictly individual microphone-based engagement. But from the standpoint of the public, there needs to be certain guarantees, like a digital and verbal opportunity for their input to go on official record, a chance to exchange ideas with their peers and elected officials, and some way for their input to be accounted for in decisions/policies that are made.

## Introduction

In many places, official public meetings are fraught with frustration, conflict, and mistrust. [By "official public meetings,"](#) we mean meetings that are open to the public, where elected or appointed officials are present, and where policy decisions are being made. The legal structure and operational design of these meetings is largely a vestige of decades past and have not really changed over time. Often, the main opportunity for the public to participate is limited to 'public comment/call to the public' in front of a microphone. This often ends up being a contentious and cathartic, rather than collaborative and deliberative, exercise between elected officials and the public.

Some of the enduring challenges that official public meetings experience includes poor or limited attendance, polarized atmospheres that consist of division between members of a community and between members of the public and official staff. The mixture of limited attendance and volatile public settings impacts the quality of discourse and safety for those present in the room, and this tends to trickle into the community more broadly.

There is evidence to suggest that bad public meetings are damaging because they:

- Lower public trust and confidence in government, making it harder to implement policies and maintain financial stability.
- Increase frustration and stress for public officials and staff.
- Lead to delays and erratic decision-making, which further erodes trust and wastes public funds.
- Worsen inequities because meeting participants are not representative of the communities most affected by policies.

In fact, we have heard several reasons why talking at a microphone tends to leave the public dissatisfied across our Better Public Meetings communities:

1. The limited time to speak.
2. Depending on the context, if there are large numbers of people in the queue, not everyone might get a chance to speak.
3. The lack of elected official acknowledgment and discussion after speaking.
4. The limited awareness of how input gets factored into decision-making.
5. The significant rise in contentious and unsafe environments where people thread a thin line between freedom of speech and aggressive, [hateful](#), or unruly behavior.

By contrast, our team works with the idea (which is backed up by a vast body of research) that democratic innovations are a vital way to help people feel like their input matters in decision-making. Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar define [democratic innovations](#) as “processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence” (see appendix C).

Democratic innovations tend to involve some form of agenda-setting, learning and informed conversation, and recommendations on an issue. This combination is what people in the democracy innovation space refer to as a good ‘deliberative’ process. When there is intentional design for public learning and conversation, it often has some form of impact on people’s internal disposition because norms for engagement are commonly agreed upon generating mutual respect, the trust for a process increases because it is designed for thoughtful two-way communication on a specific issue, and/or policy outcomes arise in some way from a more considered participatory exercise.

The goal then is to create structure spaces and opportunities for collaboration, and **retain**, rather than eliminate the spirit of what public participation at official meetings is meant to do (as opposed to what currently exists), but by injecting some democratic innovation to transform the relationships between and across community members and local leaders.

A wealth of practical work in the field of democracy innovation suggests that better public meetings are possible, sustainable, and measurable:

- There are proven tools and practices that can ensure civil, productive dialogue among people who have different backgrounds and interests.
- These practices can be adopted as part of official public meetings, in full accordance with open meetings laws.
- Before and after public meetings, supplementary tools and practices can reach broader audiences: providing information, gathering input, and reporting on decisions.
- Public satisfaction with public meetings, and the state of local democracy generally, can be measured through digital tools.

There is no one size fits all solution to how communities can make their meetings more inclined to civil productive dialogue because each community is different based on historical relationships, political dynamics, and legally binding requirements. However, we do feel that there are ways to make the atmosphere of official meetings both supportive of the public and the work that government or public sector staff need to do.

Understanding the local context is critical. Local leaders should take stock of the history, social capital, and civic assets of their communities to strengthen meetings and the relationship between government and citizens. [The Center for Democracy Innovation](#) at the [National Civic League](#) is running a ‘Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings project’ funded by the [AAA-ICRD Foundation](#) in collaboration with a community of practice made up of civic engagement experts from a diverse set of cities and counties across the United States:

- International City/County Management Association,
- National League of Cities
- Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation
- Participedia
- Kettering Foundation
- Cities Fortifying Democracy
- Democracy Cities

We are working with [three pilot communities](#) to advance collaborative, best practices in official public meetings:

- The Mesa Public Schools Governing Board in Mesa, Arizona
- The City Council of Boulder, Colorado
- The Fayetteville Next Commission and Community Police Advisory Board in Fayetteville, North Carolina

In this work we are building on best practices in the democratic innovation field and drawing upon local democratic assets and actors, such as city officials (elected/appointed), non-profit organizations and networks, government departments and their staff, anchor institutions (libraries, universities etc.), neighbourhood groups, and engaged residents. By creating a localized strategy catered to context specific situations, those convening official public meetings will work with us to design an inclusive and collaborative formal process with the public.

### **What’s in this document?**

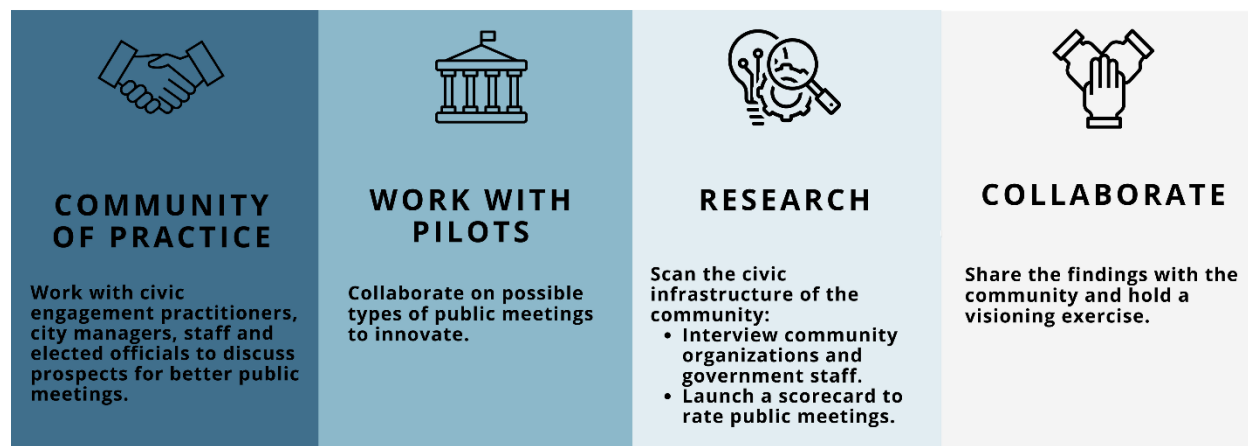
This document contains five sections: our research methodology, community highlights (various types of local civic/social capital and any challenges the community faces), Governing Board meeting themes based largely on our interviews and some issue tracking, an overview of the results of the Civic Engagement Scorecard, and lastly, our Center for Democracy Innovation’s recommendations for better public meetings in Mesa. We have included several appendices, including our interview questions, the full set of answers to the Scorecard, an example of norms for civil discourse, and some of the references we used in this document.

## Methodology

The project involves several stages of collaboration in the community.

# Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings project

Process and timeline



The Mesa Civic Infrastructure Scan is community-engaged research report about the state of local democracy and community connections in Mesa. The information we present ***is not meant to be an exhaustive examination of local civic engagement and connections, and it is not an academic study.*** This report is a form of ‘strategic research’ meant to provide a ***snapshot*** of some important elements of civic life in Mesa, including challenges and opportunities for improving the quality of experiences in Governing Board meetings, and the community more broadly.

The research was conducted over the course of 6 months (summer to winter 2023). The project consists of qualitative interviews with local stakeholders (see Appendix B and C) and a quantitative scorecard (see Appendix A) of resident experiences during Mesa Public Schools Governing Board meetings. The interviews included a broad array of internal and external actors, some of which had critical thoughts about Governing Board meetings, allowing the Center for Democracy Innovation team to gather a well-rounded, third-party perspective of some of the nuanced challenges facing the Mesa Governing Board.

The scorecard is ***not a representative sample survey***, and the findings are not meant to be interpreted in a way other than providing a baseline of public attitudes and experiences during Board meetings. The idea behind the scorecard is to ***develop an internal civic measurement infrastructure*** that lasts and becomes a normal facet of Governing Board interactions with the public. Where this opportunity did not exist before, the hope is that over time, as democratic innovations are pursued with the intention of diversifying who attends meetings, the staff can see changes in user experiences and attitudes toward public meetings, along with adjustments that might need to be made based on the data. The reality is that even though the scorecard prioritizes

those that attend only, having this opportunity is an important tool to showcase a level of transparency and accountability to the public at Board meetings, allowing people an avenue to provide their opinions on how they view the quality of the meeting.

The scorecard was available to the public in English. The opportunity for the public to rate their experience of Governing Board meetings was offered by the chair, and registered attendees were sent a follow up email to fill out the scorecard. Below is an outline of our research approach:

- 15 semi-structured anonymous interviews with Mesa Public Schools governing board and staff, community organizations, residents, local media, and academia.
- Desk research (including [Arizona's Open Meeting Law](#), [Mesa Public Schools Governing Board Policies and Public Participation at Board meetings](#), and issue tracking)
- [Civic engagement quantitative scorecard](#) at three Mesa Public Schools Governing Board meetings (11/14, 11/28 and 12/12): 52 total responses (44 complete and 8 partially complete) as of 12/18/2023.

## Community Highlights

In Mesa, there are vibrant community networks and partnerships that positively impact local democracy and social capital within the community. Mesa has a highly educated and aging population, but it is also very diverse (specifically in the West end of the city) with a sizeable Hispanic community and adjacent Native American population. Also, there is a notable Hispanic student population (46% of the student body) in Mesa Public Schools.

There is a strong mixture of hyperlocal and city-wide participation. This consists of multiple *neighborhood* organizations that are informally defined by residents with varied levels of organization and some of which are large HOAs like Dobson Ranch that are quasi-governmental. Faith-based groups are an integral part of the Mesa community, and there is a sizeable LDS community (downtown) that is organized by geography and then by ward and stakes. Mesa also contains a variety of city as well as non-profit civil society organizations, partnerships and connections that strive to enhance the quality of civic life through various types of programming and service delivery, and resident organization through rotaries, the American Legion, the Mesa Association of Hispanic Citizens and the United Way. The Mesa community is passionate about sports and often connects volunteerism to sports groups (for example, in connection to baseball and the MLB). Mesa is also a strong arts community including its high school and junior high performing arts and Mesa Arts center.

The community provides a strong support base for Mesa Public schools, seen in the variety of parent/guardian and student bodies that animate a vibrant school community, and in the adjacent input structures within the school district, specifically the various committees appointed by and feeding into the governing board. These internal structures encourage community voice into Governing Board policy directions and issues/concerns.



### Capacity Building Programs

- The Mesa Parent Council
- The Student Advisory Group B
- The Curriculum Advisory Council
- The Audit Committee
- The Employee Benefit Trust
- Project Mesa (sexuality curriculum focus)

Externally, Mesa Public Schools has a strong network of partnerships with the City of Mesa and Arizona State University. There are specific connections that can both continue to be strengthened but also be established to develop an ongoing ecosystem of relationships to provide opportunities and tap into the broader community. These include:

### Collaborative Networks

- The Mayor's Youth Committee.
- City of Mesa, Human Development Committee, education roundtable. Mayor's initiative of faith-based coordination – how to support schools through faith-based groups not just LDS.
- Elected Councilmembers running local campaigns like #mesakindness.
- Just Serve and their Day of Service.
- Aliento (for engaging with Hispanic community).
- Teacher's College, ASU (operating at a multilateral district level - they've move toward 'building the next education work force' which should connect to Bond and Override in some capacity because parents aren't seeing or connecting the larger systems change taking place in school districts that connect to the University.
- The local news outlet (i.e. Scott Schumaker – has a column specifically covering board meetings. It would be useful to have officials be available for comment – in connection with newspaper column. Not that easy-to-get responses to questions and wonders if administrators allow/if it's okay to talk to the press.
- Inner Valley Faith (involving different kinds of churches)

While we note the strong efforts by Mesa Public Schools and the Governing Board there are significant challenges that impact public participation in regular Governing Board meeting sessions. Mesa, particularly West Mesa, is ethnically diverse and yet members of the Hispanic community do not regularly attend the meetings. In addition, even with some student representation present at Board meetings, there is not enough student participation at meetings.

Over the past few years, especially since the pandemic, there has been an uptake of politically driven participation that often takes up national talking points within the context of school board meetings. Staff have noted that they endure a lot of aggressive behaviour from a specific group of people that often attend the meetings and have even had to increase security presence out of fear that violence might become an issue at these meetings. We have also heard that political polarization is an issue. How information is not only conveyed but engaged in the community is important.

At the same time, some members of the public feel like they're on the outside and have noted that any resistance toward what they feel are issues that require their input comes with pejorative terms about their character that feigns anger toward them. One of the issues that this is felt the most is on transgender guidelines. They take issue with how politics is being stacked against them, specifically on the part of the teacher's association. Some members of the public see this as a tactical way to shut them out. By contrast, the teacher's association feel like they are reacting to unfair criticism of the entire school system (staff and governance), such that if the broader teacher body had an issue, they'd cancel their memberships. They see their role as a positive counterbalance to the types of critiques that are predominating public comments.

With this contentious relationship repairing the difficult, sometimes broken relationship among select community members and the Governing Board, requires new ways to engage students, and their parents/guardians so that more diverse voices present in meetings. Another important factor to consider is how to engage with politically diverse constituencies in ways that avoid zero sum interactions.

Part of this scenario entails new modes of information sharing and communication using digital tools and opportunities. Social media plays a substantial role in mobilizing the community, or members of the community, adults are heavily focused on Facebook, and students are mostly on Instagram.

Regardless of these challenges, one thing does unite everyone, and that's a desire to see students succeed. There is a clear opportunity to bring people together by focusing on student outcomes and proficiency. Part of this will rely upon new mechanisms for issue-specific and well-designed public input, but it can draw from Mesa's own strengths and history of successful engagement practices.

Previous Engagements to Build On
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Neighborhood engage outreach programs</li><li>• Mesa's controversial zoning permit for a homeless facility</li><li>• The School Board Strategic Plan</li><li>• Everyday community and parent efforts to support schools</li><li>• The previous Master Plan with district wide facilitated engagement</li><li>• Principals bringing new community members to Board meetings</li><li>• Kindness proclamation month.</li><li>• Student advocacy</li></ul>

## Mesa Governing Board Themes

### Theme 1: The Need for Civil Dialogue at the Governing Board Meetings

An important theme that we heard from interviewees is that there is a need for civil dialogue at Governing Board meetings. There is a lack of civility in community-elected board member interactions. Exchanges during call to the public can often be polarizing. The Governing Board has an opportunity to think about how they can create constructive opportunities for conversation. This does not mean a free-for-all scenario, rather than something designed to be generative. Initially, it

will be a challenge to see past traumatic exchanges at recurring Governing Board meetings. Meanwhile, we need to also consider that there is a general loss of trust in civic institutions where that trust needs to also be rebuilt. Both staff and certain members of the community distrust each other, and part of this is because lines of communication are broken, and the information and discussion ecosystem might be missing effective two-way dialogue. That said, there are indications from different sides of the divide that there is a desire for deliberation. Even within the Board there has been internal challenges, and this can resonate outward into the community, which means some work needs to be done to build trust between board members.

## KEY QUOTES

- “We can agree to listen to each other and know that there can be two truths in a room, that the problems we are trying to solve are so complex and we need everybody’s input, but it has to be around common ground of serving our children.”
- “Last few meetings have not been in the spirit of engaging the community. Certain segment in the ranks of the school system is not pleased with what they’re hearing. But it’s not just 5 or 6 people that share the same sentiment, there are lots of people that are missed by leadership. Some people are fearful to speak, and this includes both parents and employees.”
- “The source of frustration is that there’s no conversation. We need to have difficult and uncomfortable conversations, not avoid them. Get everyone in a room, allow for the public to outline their areas of contention, understand why, and then ask how this side might benefit the students – bring it back to the students.”
- “There should be tolerance for robust arguments that might even get emotional. I don’t want people avoiding each other altogether.”
- ‘MAGA folks are bringing in partisan politics into nonpartisan school board elections and meetings, heavily focused on CRT and transgender issues.’
- “Some board members have no interest in having a civil relationship, having a good faith relationship with peers. The Board is its own roadblock. Hurt feelings haven’t been resolved and the board isn’t kind.”

## Theme 2: Improving Public Comment Opportunities

One of the core opportunities for the public to official participate during Governing Board regular sessions is at a microphone during the call to the public portion of the agenda. There are a host of concerns the revolve around this exercise. From the perspective of staff, call to the public is seen as problematic because the public might use the time to spread misinformation on issues, use the opportunity to constantly criticize staff or try to get a rise out of the crowd rather than provide nuanced comments on an issue. Some are worried that people showing up do not have children currently in a Mesa Public School. The flip side of this is that some of the public see this as a nominal rather than substantive opportunity to engage on an issue, especially when comments are not responded to (even if by law). More recently, call to the public is seen as problematic because divergent groups try to stack the room with their own commenters, which detracts from the spirit of what call to the public should be. Ultimately, there are thoughts about the legal ability to eliminate call to the public. But other’s feel like other forms of input is needed instead of removing any vestige of public input at these meetings.

## KEY QUOTES

- “3 minutes a month is a miniscule amount of time to try and address issues that face the community. It’s a one-way communication, speaking to leadership, not with leadership. If there could be a forum to meet with leadership, once a month, roundtable style, that’s open, transparent, and honest, community voices and concerns can be heard, because now due to state law, leadership can’t respond – that’s not a conversation. We could also allow online space to post and field issues that get answers. Have some kind of feedback loop to the community.”
- “We do a live stream of our meetings and then post a recording of the meeting the next day, but there is no online interaction. People cannot send questions online.”
- “Public Comment is not legally required in Arizona, and with the help of a contract attorney they can take this off the agenda because it’s gotten ugly and detracting from their ability to have productive meetings. That’s one option. But of course, you don’t want to do that right, because then it looks like you’re afraid of people and their First Amendment rights.”
- “The speakers tend to build on each other and get ramped up, and then when they get to the podium, they’re ready to blow. Would be interested in what a round table would look like.”
- It’s nice that sometimes people show up to tell the governing board what they like. You rarely get positive affirmation.
- There’s a rush to be first to sign up for public comments, it’s an issue, because it’s first come first served. People that oppose each other are trying to show up early to sign up. Get a contract attorney to handle public meetings/laws.

## Theme 3: Diversifying Who Participates in Public Meetings

Staff at Mesa Public Schools work hard to provide many ways for the public to engage with the board, including via email, phone calls, they post events and opportunities on the website, governing board page, and at physical buildings following state law. That said, there are thoughts by various people we interviewed around how the school board needs to create intentional engagement with diverse communities. There need to be ways to open the process so that the issues being discussed draw in diverse groups – i.e. talking about the allocation of resources to meet West Mesa needs. Hispanic parents/guardians do tend to show up when students are being celebrated but in general their attendance is rather marginal by comparison to the people that tend to show up consistently. Also, few kids go to the board meetings, but the decisions impact them. Having kids more involved might change the atmosphere of existing meetings.

## KEY QUOTES

- “Outreach is really an area that we really had to improve upon. Initially with limited English to Spanish translation of documents, but now we have someone on the team that does Hispanic outreach. They are very comfortable engaging with her, and at their school, but not as comfortable coming to a very formal public meeting. We need to be so much better at expanding our reach and comfortability.”
- “Things that we’re talking about don’t resonate with our Hispanic families. When we talk about our bond and override it concerns safety and security measures, teacher and employee

salaries, and parents, and mothers are concerned about having enough bus drivers for kids to make it to school in time for breakfast.”

- “We have 81 schools, I’d love to see 81 parents, but at most maybe we see 30.”
- “Sometimes notices are advertised in local paper but it’s in the legal notices section and its nondescript.”
- “We have great relationships with the formal structure of the Salt River-Pima Maricopa Indian Community, but parents often go through their tribal council to work through challenges. Yet it still doesn’t feel incredibly authentic.”
- “Could do better for under-represented populations but there are personal invitations that go out (in English and Spanish, voice calls, FB translated event page).”
- “Lots of outreach to tap into. Capitalize on active PTOs. Leverage who they know. Perhaps going into retirement communities.”
- “From a student perspective we don’t believe there is outreach to people of color, because mostly older white men show up. It’s a little jarring because a lot of stuff affects lower income communities of color.”
- “In terms of barriers to people participating, I do think length is a barrier. People that work don’t have the time to put in like 4 hours or three hours.”
- “From a student perspective we have no idea how these meetings work or are publicized. Students don’t check Facebook, on the website for this stuff.”
- “From a student perspective, at first it was really scary, but as I kept going it became more comfortable. It’s intimidating, it’s official, its real, people are screaming and yelling. It would be useful to have more students in the room because board meetings affect students, and if they’re not in the room who knows what decision will take place.”

## Theme 4: Creating New Spaces and Using Existing Events for Student and Community Participation

From our conversations with various stakeholders there are opportunities to create new or draw from existing community events that are much less formal than public meetings. The informality of unofficial settings encourages a different sort of participation that builds trusting relationships and gathers different types of input. This could be built out in a way that helps the Board understand community needs outside of its official setting. There are existing student and parent bodies that could be leveraged, as well as community spaces and events that could be opportunities to encourage engagement on relevant issues.

### KEY QUOTES

- “I think we must open our doors and bring people into a less formal environment. We have principals host tours once a week and have people come in for conversations.”
- “There’s a subcommittee on social and racial justice that tries to include diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.”
- “Teacher’s Association struggle with the amount of negativity at the Board meetings. Want opportunities for their members to share their thoughts. Willing to share and talk about stories to reduce hardness between opposing community members and association.”

- “Each school has a Parent Advisory Representative that hears voices. The format of Parent Council, which makes groups smaller, less formalized allows for opportunities to table talk, address truth and rumours.
- “Student Advisory Board. Students come together from each school, as advisors, and take information to the board, present to the school board from a youth perspective.”
- “By contrast to board meetings the student meetings are enjoyable and welcoming. Make board meetings fun – perhaps have an art show.”
- “Smaller types of meetings at the board and have more opportunities for the board and the public to talk through issues, not just 45 seconds to 3 minutes.”
- “Hold the belief that ‘we want people even if it’s not what we want to hear but use the time to build a relationship and trust. Many parents don’t rub shoulders with members of the board.”
- “Find ways to host meetings in twos (then doesn’t have to be called an official meeting).” Perhaps host pre-meetings to get out of echo chambers.
- “If people don’t go to us, we go to them. How about travelling to a gym and have a rotating space.”
- “Think about publicizing topics important to students in their classrooms.”
- “During sports and music events – which are popular in Mesa – can there be some sort of publicity – say Mountain View Highschool they get lots of participation. Would Board members attend these events.”

## Civic Engagement Scorecard Highlights

The civic engagement scorecard has been used at 3 Mesa Public Schools Governing Board meetings. Full Scorecard results are in Appendix A. Here are some interesting highlights about public experiences at the Governing Board meetings they attended. Just over half of the participants felt their overall experience was good at the meeting. All the people that filled out the scorecard have previously attended a Governing Board meeting. It’s almost a 50/50 split in terms of participating online and in-person, and nearly everyone did not speak. Over 40 percent of the responses want clarity on how public input influences decisions. Regarding broader community participation, 40 percent say that parents and guardians support schools and feel they are welcomed, but they note that most often it’s the same people getting involved and the community doesn’t tend to mix due to lots of tension. A significant number of respondents were parents/guardians, a vast majority were Mesa residents, and most people were white and over 40.

## Center for Democracy Innovation Recommendations

Our interviews and research on the civic infrastructure of Mesa indicates that:

- There is a desire for more direct, informed, deliberative, enjoyable interactions between board members, staff, and community members, in which everyone listens and is heard.
- There is a need for engagement that brings the community together, across differences, that focuses on students first.
- There are trusted authorities and community members and partners that can be more involved in diversifying a participating public, striving to engage a larger, more diverse array of people.

- Engagement at boards should happen/alternate in places (geographic and digital) that work for both citizens and the board.

To achieve these goals, we recommend that you:

1. Make the “Here to Listen” survey into a texting-enabled engagement process that will foster listening, deliberation, and idea-gathering.
2. Support greater student leadership by creating new district-wide roles (such as nonvoting student members of the Board or a new Student Advisory Committee), helping them use new tools and structures to gather student ideas and input, and capitalizing on the success of Hacktivate in helping students solve public problems.
3. Starting with board study sessions, experiment with a format that replaces “call to the public” with a deliberative dialogue segment, consistent with open meeting laws/governing board policies, while still providing opportunities for the public to go on official record regarding agenda items.
4. Upgrade the infrastructure for diverse community engagement by strengthening conduits for information, supporting opportunities for productive dialogue, and holding meetings in different parts of the community.

Within each of these broad recommendations there are several options and steps to consider.

In addition to members of the board discussing these recommendations, this work should have some form of public consultation or opportunity to reflect on what is recommended. Wherever possible, Mesa Public Schools should collaborate with the City of Mesa to make engagement efforts of both institutions more diverse, efficient, and effective.

## **RELEVANT ELEMENTS OF ARIZONA OPEN MEETING LAW / GOVERNING BOARD POLICY**

- An advisory committee is defined as “any entity, however designated, that is officially established, on motion and order of a public body or by the presiding officer of the public body, and whose members have been appointed for the specific purpose of making a recommendation concerning a decision to be made or considered or a course of conduct to be taken or considered by the public body.” A special or standing committee may consist of members of the public body who have been appointed by or authorized to act for the public body.
- The agenda for a public meeting must contain a listing of the “specific matters to be discussed, considered or decided at the meeting.”
- A public body may include a call to the public on a meeting agenda. “Should a public body include a call to the public during a public meeting, members of the public body may not discuss or take action on matters raised during the call to the public that are not specifically identified on the agenda. Action taken as a result of public comment will be limited to directing staff to study the matter, responding to any criticism or scheduling the matter for further consideration and decision at a later date.”
- The Open Meeting Law does not establish a right for the public to participate in the discussion or in the ultimate decision of the public body.

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- The Board will not receive public comment during a study session unless requested by the President.
- The citizen may address the Board during an open call to the public, if a call to the public is listed on the agenda.
- The President may deviate from these time limits for speakers and the duration of the call to the public and other comment periods as appropriate to maximize the opportunity for persons to offer their viewpoints regarding a matter.
- The President may recognize members of the public to assist the Board with information for the conduct of its official business.
- A Board member may request the Superintendent or President to place an issue presented during the call to the public on the agenda of a future Board meeting.

## DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Make the “Here to Listen” survey into a texting-enabled engagement process that will foster listening, deliberation, and idea-gathering.

To meet the goals of involving larger numbers of people, amplifying student voices, and engaging community members ‘where they are,’ we recommend a broader, more distributed process that can complement school board meetings and other events. The questions in the “Here to Listen” survey and the Hacktivate event provide a great opportunity to do this.

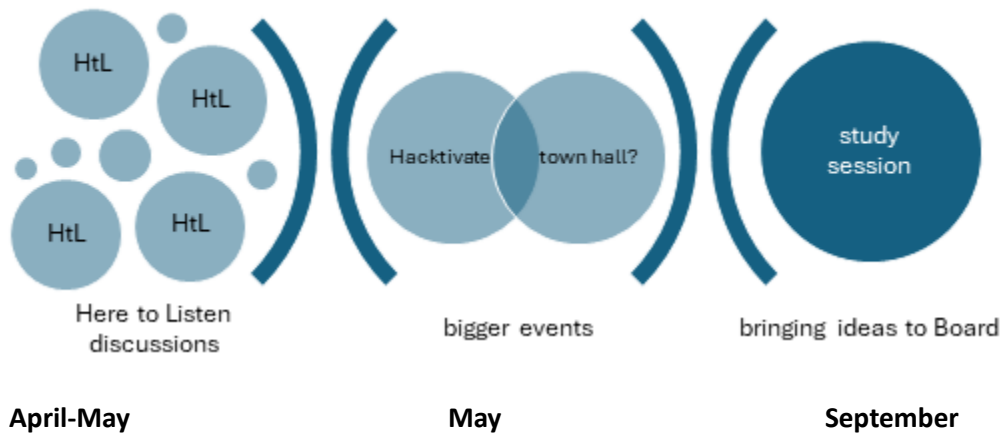
We recommend that we help you design a “Here to Listen” process, including active listening, norm-setting, and other facilitation techniques, that is:

- Texting-enabled so it is scalable, easy to use, and accessible to all kinds of people.
- Gives facilitators (staff and board members) a good, supportive process in which to use their skills.
- ‘Branched’ so that the material fits the group (for example, provides questions and info in Spanish for Spanish speakers).
- Based on a targeted outreach and communications plan to different segments of the community.
- Elicits feedback on the three main goals of the board.

Includes a branch with info and questions on school safety, to feed into Hacktivate. Both the feedback on the goals and the ideas on improving school safety could then be discussed at Hacktivate and other events, leading to recommendations to be considered at a study session in the fall.



**Figure 1: Process/timeline for Here to Listen and Hacktivate**



2. Support greater student leadership by creating new district-wide roles (such as nonvoting student members of the Board or a new Student Advisory Committee), helping them use new tools and structures to gather student ideas and input, and capitalizing on the success of Hacktivate in helping students solve public problems.

Students noted that they feel like the Board is disconnected from the broader student body and that they should be more directly involved in the business of the Board because it often directly impacts them. Students noted that they have felt that Board meetings are intimidating, and that while they have been able to present at Board meetings, they are not often asked for their own solutions to pressing problems.

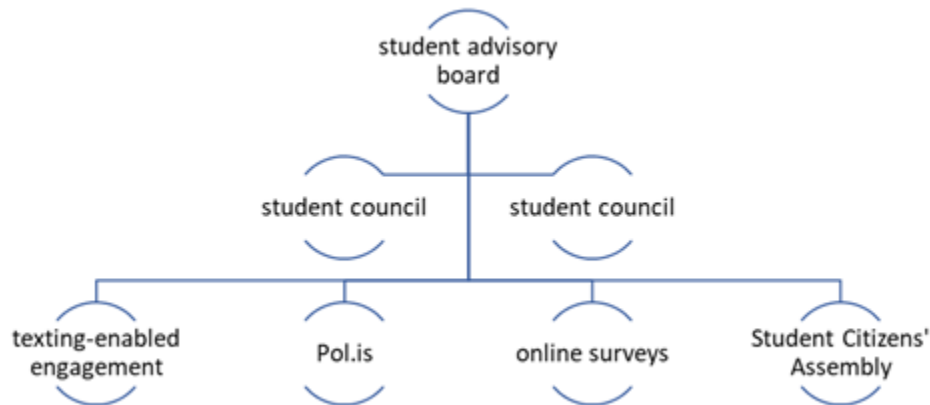
In addition to giving students new leadership skills and experiences, supporting a larger student presence in Board meetings and other settings is likely to make the overall tone of these meetings more civil, productive, and focused on what is best for young people.

In order to support greater student leadership, we recommend that you:

- Appoint 2-3 students to serve on the Board as non-voting members, or alternatively, consistent with Open Meeting Laws, establish a *Student Advisory Committee on Student Affairs*.
- Use processes like [TextTalkAct](#), [Poli.is](#), surveys, or a [student citizens' assembly](#) to engage members of the broader student body. For example, students mentioned that they talk and have their own solutions to issues related to school bathrooms.
- One way to get people collaborating is to present them with a problem and ask them to solve it. Use [Hacktivate](#) for students to tackle important issues, perhaps doing one iteration focused on civics (drawing on [icivics](#)).
- *Another option:* Implement school-based [Participatory Budgeting](#) with assistance from the Center for the Future of Arizona. One common shortcoming of student leadership roles is that they mainly attract students who are high-achievers in traditional ways. Those students are asked to represent their peers rather than representing AND engaging their peers. The result is

that only a small fraction of the student body is involved. Therefore, we suggest that the engagement structures and opportunities for students be carefully connected and layered, as in the following illustration:

**Figure 2: Example of student engagement infrastructure**



3. Starting with board study sessions, experiment with a format that replaces “call to the public” with texting-enabled deliberation, consistent with open meeting laws/governing board policies, which also provides opportunities for the public to go on official record regarding agenda items.

The interactions between community members, board members, and staff at official board meetings are frustrating and unproductive, according to members of all three groups. There are concerns that the lack of connection and dialogue makes public participation at the meetings very limited. Community members also express the concern that their input at meetings does not influence public decisions. Overall, these meetings lack the qualities that make people [feel heard](#).

The same sort of technology and tactics evident in “Here to Listen” could also be used to make board study sessions more deliberative and productive. This process could have its own, similar title, like “Listen, Learn, Contribute.” It would:

- Allow the board/staff to gather feedback from both in-person attendees and remote viewers.
- Incorporate ideas that emerged from Here to Listen, Hacktivate, and other events.
- Highlight questions/topics on which the board wants input.
- Keep the discussion on track and prevent any one speaker from dominating the meeting.

Based on the relevant sections above about open meeting laws, there is no specific legal requirement to host call to the public, or to use the conventional open-microphone format. School districts can facilitate conversations between the public and board members ***so long as no action results immediately from the deliberations***. Board members and staff can participate in these deliberative discussions ***only if the topic to be discussed is outlined on the meeting agenda***. Our recommendation is ***not*** to abandon the core values of public comment, but rather to reinforce them by using a new, better format. This could be explored currently in study sessions of the board to see whether the new format is helpful and how it could be improved (see Appendix D for example norms of civil discourse).

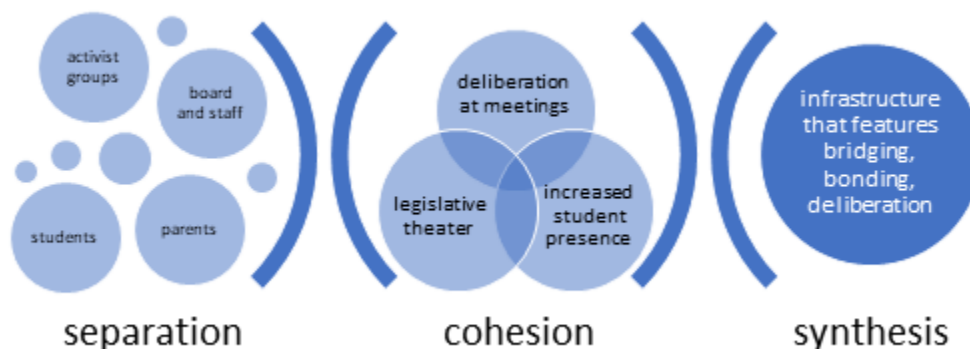
#### 4. Upgrade the infrastructure for diverse community engagement by building social cohesion, strengthening conduits for information, and supporting opportunities for productive dialogue.

The scan interviews and the baseline data gathered in the Scorecard suggest a need for more involvement from different members of the community, not just the most active members. For example, here is a substantial Hispanic community in Mesa, but Hispanic parents typically only engage in events that celebrate student achievements. Offering a broader range of opportunities, including ones that are more accessible to people in terms of language, location, and technology, can help a wider range of people participate.

Two types of efforts might be particularly helpful for building social cohesion:

- Building on the work in city council meetings, [including in Arizona](#), we suggest the use of legislative theater, in which people play roles using past official meeting transcripts. This allows community members, staff, and board members to see things differently by “walking a mile in the shoes” of their counterparts. Legislative theater has been used in situations where there are contentious public meetings and offers one innovative and alternative way to design official spaces to be more interactive and collaborative. It can make a tense situation fun by using art, and it can draw in Mesa Public School teachers, parents and students. Landsman’s partners at ASU/Gammage may be a helpful resource.
- Programs like Detroit Soup, [On the Table](#) in Chicago, and “Meet and Eat” in small West Virginia towns show that breaking bread can help overcome divisions, disseminate quality information, and build community bonds. The key approach in these programs is how they pair food with facilitated discussion and informal relationship building. Community groups and faith institutions (especially LDS stakes given how embedded their networks are in their wards) are suitable partners to establish the space for sharing meals to build social connections among members of the community.

**Figure 3: Building Social Cohesion**



Here are a number of additional options for upgrading civic infrastructure:

- Offer engagement training for student and parent leaders, along with district officials and staff, including topics such as:

- Strategies and tools for outreach, recruitment, and relational organizing (including digital tools like Outreach Circle)
- Facilitation of in-person and [zoom meetings](#)
- Organizing fun: incorporating food, games, music, sports, and theater in engagement (and vice versa)
- Bringing people who belong to local digital networks together for in-person events, and encouraging in-person event participants to join local digital networks
- Using the scan to identify where people are already gathering, and bringing issues to them – this is true of both in-person and online conversations (for example, there are Hispanic community members using WhatsApp, and young professionals using Slack)
- Strategies and tools for live polling and decision-making (including digital tools like Mentimeter)
- Strategies and tools for measuring participant satisfaction
- More active outreach in diverse parts (i.e. West Mesa), by working with principals/teachers, LDS stakes, etc.
- Strengthen connections with the City of Mesa (including city's Youth Council), Teacher's College at ASU, and established institutions like the Mesa Arts Center.
- Interviewees noted that one, if not the most, important way that brings out students and diverse members of the community to Board meetings, is by celebrating students. While the Board already does this on select occasions, it can be actively paired with an equity approach with targeted outreach, aimed at bringing in regular Hispanic participation at Board meetings. We can pair this with recommendations above – such as a Special Committee, a Citizens' Assembly, and/or Student Advisory Committee, all created with an intention to have Hispanic members represented.

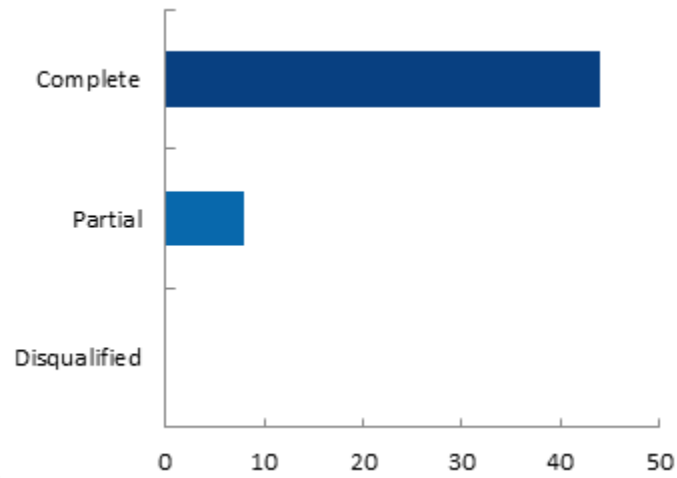
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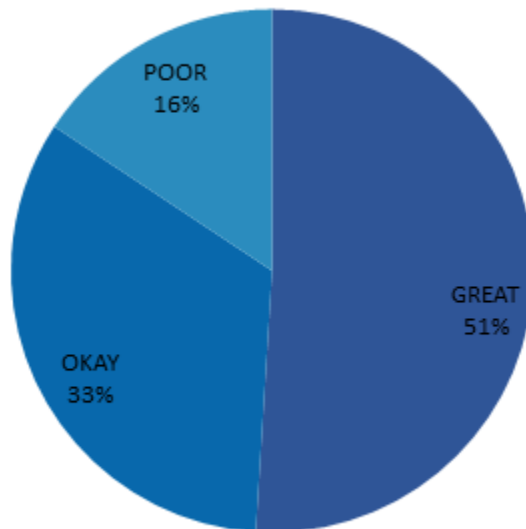
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## Appendix A: Civic Engagement Scorecard

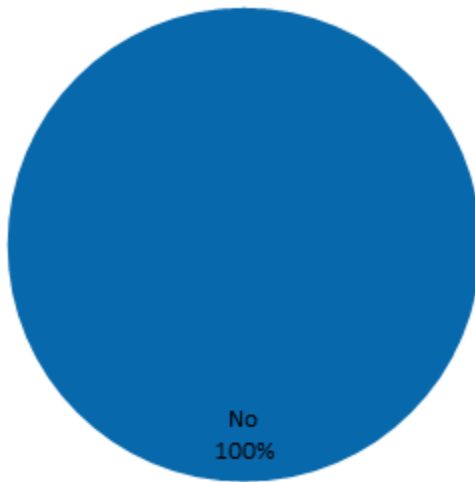
### Response Statistics



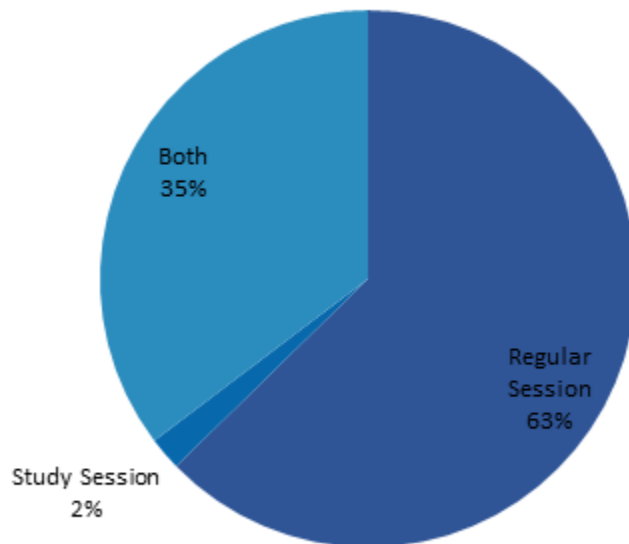
### 1. Rate Your Overall Experience at this Meeting



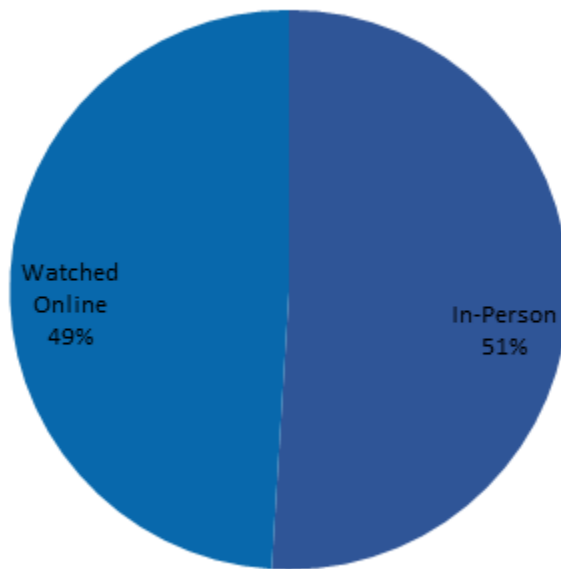
2. Is this the first time you have attended this type of meeting?



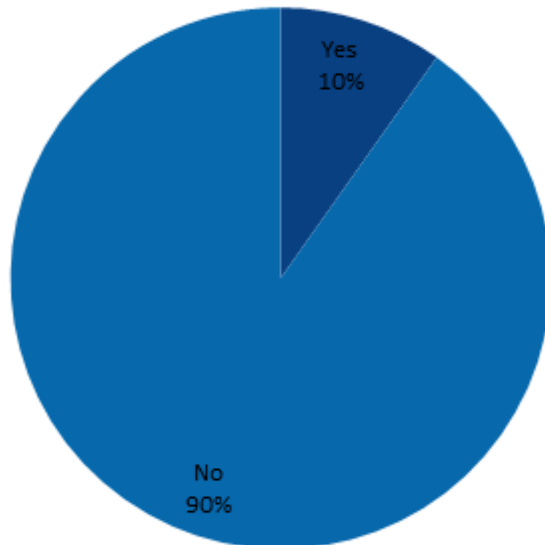
3. Which school board meeting did you attend?



4. How did you attend this meeting?

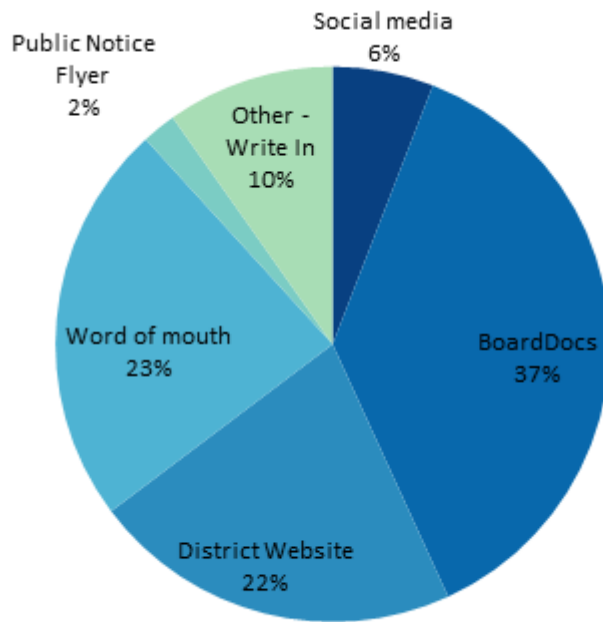


5. Did you speak at this meeting?





## 6. How did you hear about this meeting?

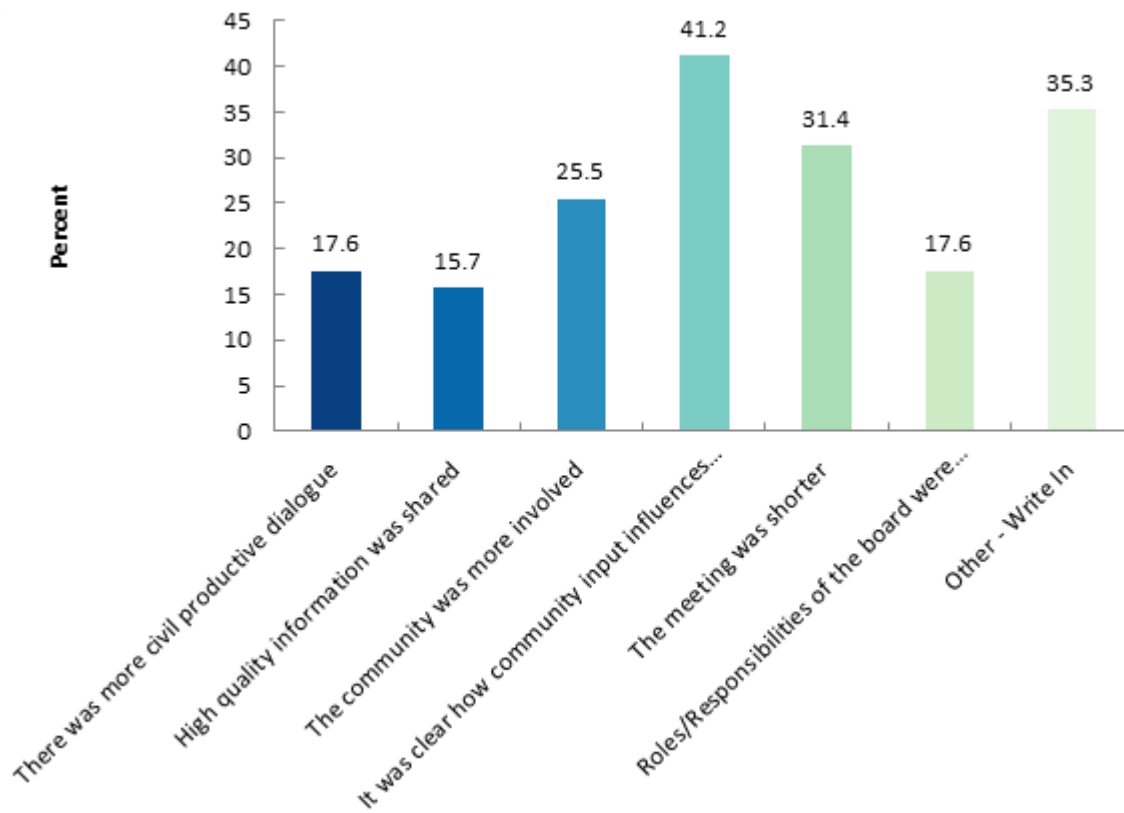


Other - Write In	Count
From my union.	1
I'm a regular attendee	1
MEA	1
Meetings are on my calendar	1
YouTube subscription	1
Totals	5

## 7. Rate Aspects of the Meeting

		It was easy to find information about the meeting	High quality information was shared	Opportunity to speak to the board was well run	I felt safe at the meeting	The meeting participants were civil during interactions	Staff was helpful with any questions I had
1 Star = Strongly Disagree / 5 Stars = Strongly Agree	Count	50	50	41	43	48	42

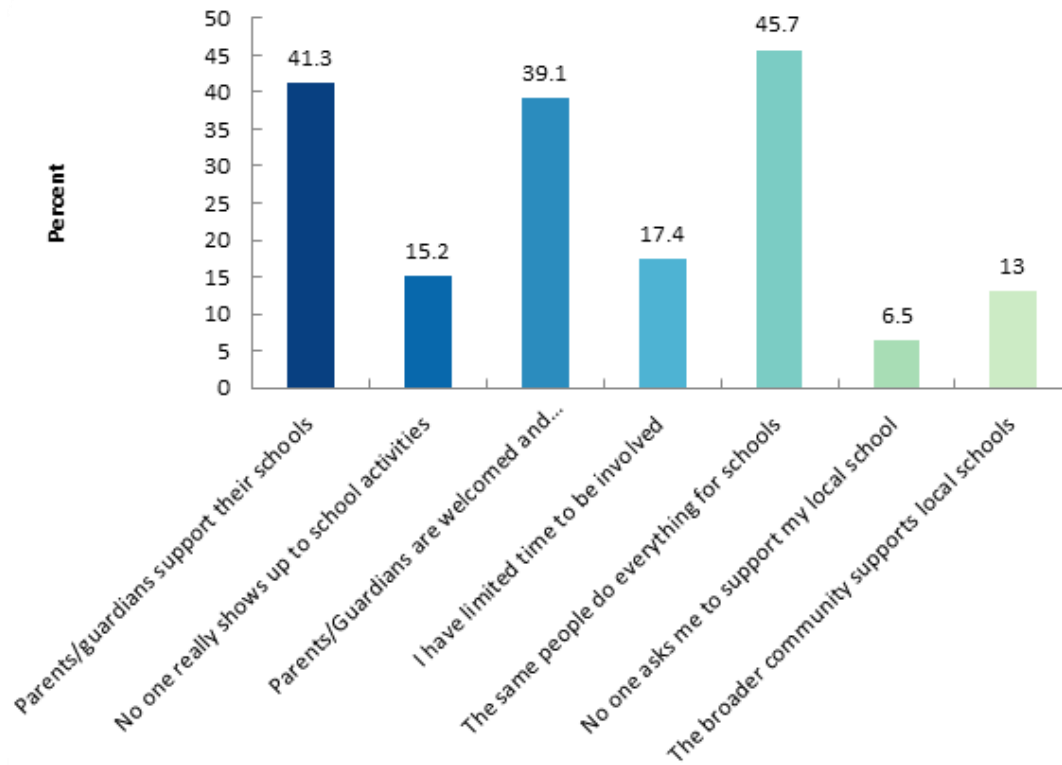
## 8. The meeting would be better if (select up to 3):



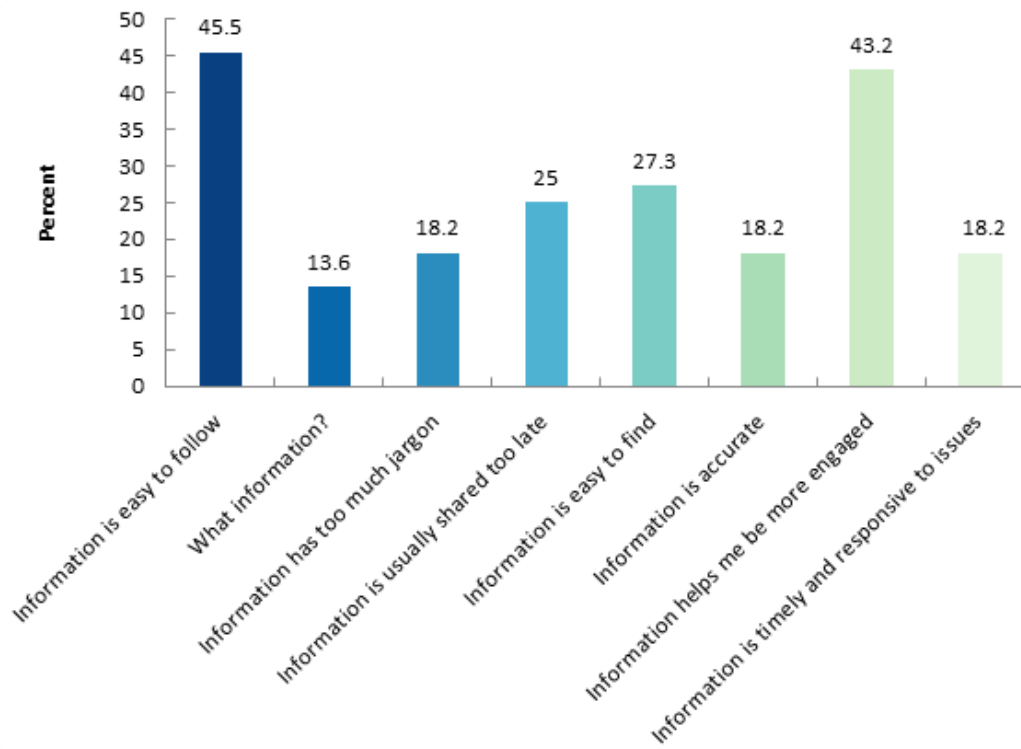
Other - Write In	Count
A man didn't loudly say "and the born and unborn" at the end of the pledge.	1
Community speakers were featured on camera; Explanation/discussion came before votes (ex. Bezos Academy consent item). Although I'd likely agree with it, I haven't heard any public discussion of the logistics and liabilities of the program for MPS.	1
I'm always a little surprised there isn't more input from board members. That may not actually be feedback for the meeting format itself, but there were specific questions about the RIF that I didn't feel were continued to their full conclusion.	1
Keep it running like a business meeting	1
Meeting was great	1
No suggestions.	1
None.	1
Nothing	1
People who address the board and the board members understand what is actually going on in the schools. That they know what happens in the world of education and what struggles are impacting our students. Not just people who are there to spout off their own self serving views.	1
Student recognition of those present should be first. Before videos and before teacher recognition.	1
The woman who leads the meeting (short white & purple hair) who seems to like to hear herself talk. She says the same thing over and over, using the same words over and over. It was very annoying and took away from the great information others presented. Only one board member asked good questions. I believe she	1

was the same one who commented on a "last slide" that wasn't presented. Clearly she's the only one who cares most about outcomes for our kiddos. Can you make her head of the board so the others learn to be like her?	
There has been very limited opportunity to have public comment at these meetings for the past several months as action items are almost none existent.	1
There was less lecturing and virtue signaling by the board president.	1
Too much talking by Andi and Marci.	1
Wish the volume on the microphones would be turned up, and that the board members would use their "teacher" voices. It is almost impossible to hear what speakers are saying.	1
doing better each meeting	1
Totals	16

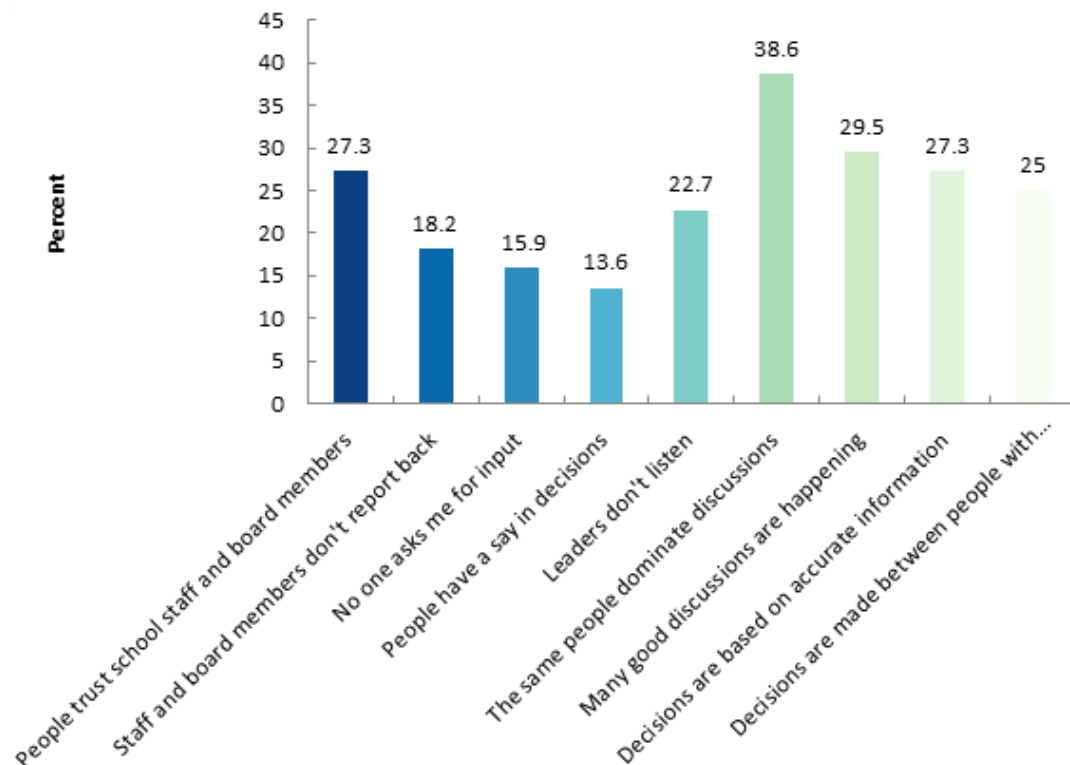
### 9. Engagement (select up to 4)



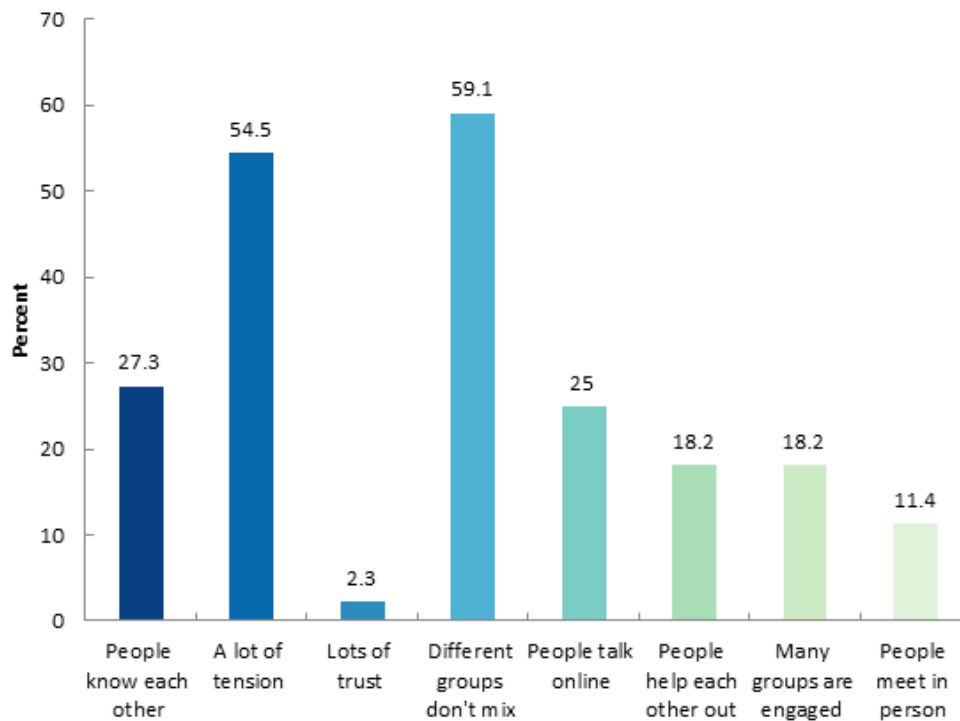
### 10. Information (select up to 4)



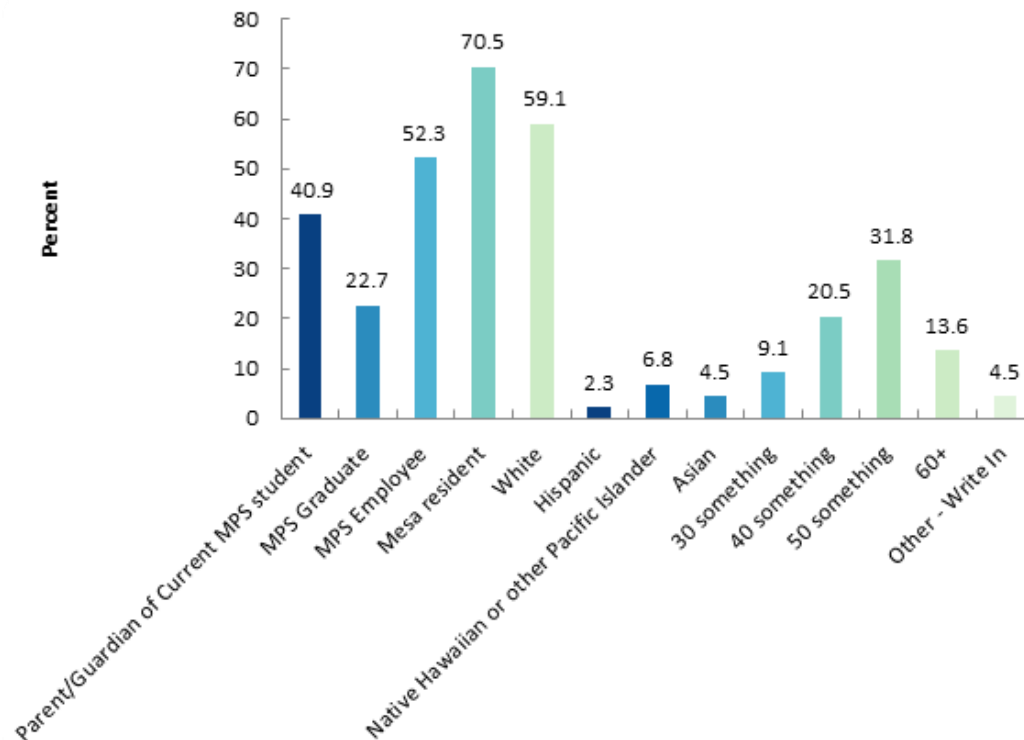
## 11. Decision-Making (select up to 4)



## 12. Community Connections (select up to 4)



### 13. Select any and all tags that describe you:



## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### About their role and work

- Can you tell us a little bit about your role, organization, and the type of work you do?
- Are there specific initiatives and/or projects you can highlight about how you engage the public?

### About their community

- What are the biggest strengths of the community?
- Can you describe your community, in terms of:
- How people are organized, are there neighborhood associations, grassroots organizations, or other types of association?
- Are there certain types of engagement that the community gravitates toward and have you tapped into these processes more?
- What are some of the big issues the public are concerned about?
  - Any issues of polarization?
- Is there collaboration between community members (across geography or demographics)?

### About the specific interactions/designs of official public meetings

- Are there strengths to how official meetings operate?
  - Are these only in-person, are they online – are the asynchronous opportunities to engage with the process outside of the meeting?

- In terms of the details of the public meetings, can you further elaborate on:
  - How the community engages with these meetings?
- Who tends to show up?
  - How they are publicized
- Outreach to communities?
- How are under-represented populations encouraged to participate
  - How public comments function
  - How public input is factored into decision-making
- Are there relevant past initiatives or experiences involving public engagement exercises?

#### **About roadblocks to public engagement**

- What are the biggest roadblocks to engagement in community forums and official public meetings?
- Has the pandemic affected participation and engagement?

#### **About innovating official public meetings**

- If you could make slight adjustments to improve the quality of life of public meetings, what would this entail?
- If you could make larger and longer-term changes, what would you like to see happen to public meetings?
- Are there past experiences/lessons that are helpful to apply to future practices?
- Any thoughts on how to better tap into community involvement?

#### **End of Interview**

- Do you have any questions for us?



## Appendix C: Democracy Innovation Types

Table 1.1 Families of democratic innovations<sup>1</sup>

Democratic innovation family	Quasi-contingent features				Contextual features		
	Participant selection method	Mode of participation	Mode of decision-making	Extent of power and authority	Policy area	Level of governance	Stage of policy process
<b>Mini-publics</b>	<b>Sortition</b>	Discursive expression, voting and listening	<b>Deliberation</b> and aggregation	Variable: Personal benefits, advise and consult, communicative influence, co-governance and direct authority	Diverse (e.g. health, environment, social policy and constitutional reform)	Local, regional, national, and transnational	Various (agenda-setting, formulation and scrutiny)
<b>Participatory budgeting</b>	Self-selection, election and purposive selection	Voting, discursive expression and listening	<b>Aggregation</b>	Co-governance and direct authority	<b>Public spending</b>	Local	Formulation and decision-making
<b>Referenda and citizen initiatives</b>	<b>Self-selection</b>	<b>Voting</b>	<b>Aggregation</b>	Advise and consult and direct authority	Diverse	Local, regional and national	Decision-making
<b>Collaborative governance</b>	Self-selection, and purposive selection	<b>Discursive expression</b> and listening	<b>Deliberation, and bargaining and negotiation</b>	Variable: Personal benefits, advise and consult, communicative influence, co-governance and direct authority	Diverse	Local, regional, national and transnational	Multiple
<b>Digital participation<sup>2</sup></b>	Self-selection, sortition, election and purposive selection	Discursive expression, voting, listening and observation	Deliberation, bargaining and negotiation, aggregation, no decision	Variable: Personal benefits, advise and consult, communicative influence, co-governance and direct authority	Diverse	Local, regional, national and transnational	Various (crowdsourcing, prioritising and scrutiny)

Notes:

1 Quasi-contingent features and contextual features of each type of democratic innovation denote ineliminable features of this family.

2 By our analysis this does not qualify as a family of democratic innovation, but is included here to show its lack of an eliminable core and also its contribution to hybridisation.

## Appendix D: Civil Discourse Example

### CITY OF CULVER RECOMMENDED CIVIL DISCOURSE GUIDELINES

Before people can reach a common resolution in a group setting, such as a meeting, they need to sense that the other participants respect them, value their needs and are open to their ideas, whether they ultimately agree or disagree. If everyone present respects each other, they will be more effective and productive and enjoy their interactions. This could lead to even more effective meetings or community conversations in the future.

#### TO PREPARE FOR A MEETING OR COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

- Determine to follow these guidelines to the extent possible.
- Anticipate listening to one another to reach a common resolution.
- Try to communicate calmly; even if you are angry. Your remarks will be more effective.
- Focus on treating all people equally regardless of their circumstances.
- Determine to treat others as you would like to be treated.
- Focus on showing respect to all participants.

### **TO BE A VALUABLE MEMBER**

- Be open to other's ideas and focus on the participants as they speak.
- Be patient.
- Honor the need for others to express themselves by not interrupting.
- Keep remarks relatively brief so that others will have time to speak.
- Acknowledge other participants' contributions to the discussion.

### **TO LISTEN TO OTHERS AND BE LISTENED TO**

- Respect the right of everyone to be heard, even if strong feelings are expressed.
- Focus on speakers' remarks, not on your impressions of these individuals.
- Presume that others have good intentions.
- Avoid being defensive
- Think before you speak
- Be sensitive to the impacts of your words and behavior.
- Debate the policy not the person.

### **TO REACH A COMMON RESOLUTION**

- Support one another
- Look for common ground
- Be willing to compromise
- Be willing to change your mind.
- Congratulate each other for having reached the resolution.

### **TO RETURN TO CIVIL DISCOURSE WHEN THINGS GET HEATED:**

- Did I understand what was said? Repeat the essence of what you heard, and ask if you understood them correctly.
- Am I feeling angry or frustrated by a statement I just heard? State clearly any tone or language you believe was inappropriate and how you felt
- How was my statement received by others? Consider asking the group or an individual the impact what you said had on them.
- Does it appear that someone was offended by my statement? Ask the person to explain what they found offensive.
- Did I offend, insult, provoke, aggravate, or embarrass someone by my statement? Apologize if you realize you did or said something harmful.

## **Appendix E: References**

- [Arizona's Open Meeting Law](#)
- [Mesa Public Schools Governing Board Policies and Public Participation at Board meetings](#)