

THE PILLARS

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Black Community Engagement Now!

Written by: Phillip King

NM Office of African American Affairs

June is African American Music Appreciation month, inspiration and impact is what music continues to provide for our New Mexico Black/African American diaspora. Music can increase engagement and inspire collaboration. I recently had the opportunity to attend the New Mexico Public Education Department's "Impact to Inspire Community Engagement Summit" at the Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque NM. The Office of African American Affairs interns Zora Tolino-MineFee, Belinda Vargas, and Elijah Ferguson, accompanied me to the summit. The purpose of the summit was to strengthen family and community engagement within the schools that we serve. Below was the mission statement and objectives:

*"If you care deeply about community-school partnerships but find it difficult to prioritize when the school year gets going. We'd like to help you create a plan to enhance community engagement at your school. You will walk away with... An effective community engagement team plan, that will approach family engagement as a team effort – so all the work doesn't fall on one person! **A strategic community engagement action plan that includes a clear plan for active listening and responsive feedback in the community. Concrete strategies to build community among families, students, teachers and administrators**" (1)*

Community engagement is defined as: *The process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the wellbeing of those people.* (2)

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN BLACK NEW MEXICO

Increasing Community engagement is still at the forefront of public and private schools in New Mexico. Although the summit is not specifically focused on the youth of the Black/African American Diaspora of New Mexico, It should be. Without engaging the Black/African American community to achieve collective “buy in” and participation in qualitative needs assessments, a school will struggle adopting new instructional and curriculum practices and/or community based educational initiatives, such as Hybrid/Online learning during national crisis, such as the Coronavirus epidemic, online registration for students, and signing up for community services such as NM Broadband Program. (3) As a former educator, I witnessed this first-hand working as an elementary/middle school educator at several title 1 schools in socio-economically struggling communities of color.

The Office of African American Affairs summit team, including myself and our three collegiate interns focused on building a team vision board, becoming better active listeners during community needs assessments, and creating open ended action-based questions for community partners, program directors, legislative decision makers, etc. The summit used a variety of resources focused on engaging communities collaboratively, thus providing for more qualitative, data driven, solutions and recommendations. These tools can be used in Black/African American Communities throughout New Mexico.

- **Impact to Inspire Team Vision Boards**
- **Listening Guide Template**
- **PTA Leader Action Rubric - you can also find other resources to support your implementation of the standards at [PTA.org/standards](https://www.pta.org/standards)**
- **Community Reflection Tool**
- **Co-plan Family-School Conferences**
- **Welcome Call Guidance**
- **Article: How to Become a Better Listener**
- **Article: The Power of Empathy Interviews in Family Engagement**

**The State of New Mexico Office of African American Affairs
310 San Pedro NE Albuquerque, NM 87110**

My recommendation to support and/or supplement community engagement is “building true consensus”. While a 1st and 4th/5th-grade teacher at Valle Vista Elementary, our Instructional Council was introduced to “Consensus Building” via a workshop by the Albuquerque Teachers Federation and the Albuquerque Public Schools. Consensus can be a powerful tool when it comes to efficient problem-solving for community needs. (4)

- pooling opinions;
- listening effectively;
- discussing ideas and differences;
- not getting all you want; and
- coming to an agreement that everyone "can live with."

Consensus is not:

- a unanimous vote;
- majority or minority rule;
- one-person rule; or
- bargaining.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN BLACK NEW MEXICO

Developing consensus building within the 60,000 Black/African American Diaspora can create equity of voice within the community and collective impact that will be united and engaged throughout the processes of needs assessments and program development in education, health, advocacy, economic development that affect the Black/African American Diaspora. A sample of such a consensus building activity is a question that was generated using the consensus building format, as listed above. Our interns were tasked with generating an open-ended action-based question. Utilizing the words each intern came up with such as crutch, authentic, equity, agreed, and didn't agree but could live with the constructed question. They may not have agreed with the actual question, but their voices were heard and could live with the question until it could be re-evaluated later. Thus, they have "buy in" to the "outcome" of consensus and the "actions" needed to achieve it.

Purpose: Removing the fence to create authentic equity.

Question: How can we, as a _____ community, provide the resources and support to eliminate the crutches that continue to support inequities in public education.

This is not an easy question to answer, nor should it be. Several comments were made, by other summit attendees, that our question was "hard" and depended on the context. It is open ended and can be dependent and adapted to fit not just community engagement from a community perspective but also those who will be responsible and accountable for those community outcomes. Place "Legislative" in the space and the context changes. It is a hard question, and we feel it needs an answer.