



The Future of Community Engagement

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Why next-generation community engagement matters to your district

As a communications professional in education, you know effective community engagement is essential to your district's success. And in these polarizing times, it's harder than ever to align community on district initiatives. You're dealing with competing interests, intensifying demands, intersecting diversity, toxic polarization, and more—and the old ways of engaging are wearing thin.

Your community has evolved—your parents are tech-savvy millennials who are busier than ever. You'll still need to tap into their collective intelligence to succeed, so it's time to reimagine how you connect and engage.

Widen your scope—bring more voices into the room and meet your community where they're at with the right

approach. Enhance and broaden access, create equity at scale, get insights effectively and efficiently, and align on priorities—that's next-generation community engagement.

But how do you ensure your community engagement initiatives are successful? To start, create a robust strategy, nail down your plan, and choose the right software.

Here's a step-by-step guide on how today's communications professionals can create long-term and sustainable community engagement in their districts—for tomorrow and beyond.

Build trust, empathy, and belonging with your engagement strategy

Many communications professionals are grappling with staff burnout and attrition, school security, equitable community engagement, staff buy-in, policy changes, and more. To tackle these difficult issues, an engagement strategy needs to be able to gather robust data while building trust between community and leadership, empathy between groups, and ensuring everyone feels a sense of belonging.

What makes a great community engagement strategy?

To create a successful, future-proof strategy, you'll need to use an approach that broadens your scope and listens to your community—leaders, educators, staff, students, and parents—and acts on their insights.

For optimal success over both the short and long term, your strategy should aim for three goals:

1. To enhance and broaden access to community feedback
2. To be equitable and easily accessible for all groups
3. To be efficient and effective in data collection and analysis

Communication professionals need methods that align communities on the district's priorities, and help competing interests find common ground and move forward together. Next-gen engagement fills in the key gaps facing most district decisions and drives better outcomes, mitigates risk, and builds buy-in and support from your community.



Next-gen engagement solutions

As an industry, communications professionals deal with timeless problems to solve, year after year. The problems may stay the same, but the solutions don't have to. From social media to the virtual-first, post-pandemic world, your community demands to be included in a way that works for them.

When developing your engagement strategy, keep these three things in mind:

1 Listen to your community

To mitigate lack of trust in leadership, listen to your community to understand their needs and concerns. Let them know you're listening by acting on their insights. Engage in conversation, not just one-way communication.

Letting your people know you're listening and that their insights affect decisions, builds trust and buy-in. Your community will be much more likely to support—not sabotage—a strategy or decision.



2

Get the right tech

Incorporate an easy-to-use, intuitive platform into your strategic planning process. Make sure it includes multilingual capabilities and can be accessed on any device. Using an accessible tech solution in addition to meetings and town halls allows you to capture more voices and create inclusive, equitable conversations.

Look for a platform that provides both classic survey functionality for quick quantitative data, and more in-depth multidirectional communication for qualitative data. You'll be able to enhance and broaden access, create equity at scale, gather insights more effectively and efficiently, and align priorities.

3

Communicate early and often

Communicate early and often about your intentions and what your community can expect. Let your community know you value their insights and they have impact. Then follow up to show how their insights are being used.

Communicating your intentions and letting your people know you value their insights will help them feel heard and invested in your community engagement strategy's outcomes—making for supported, successful strategies.

CUSTOMER STORY

Douglas SD's New Superintendent Builds Trust With Transparent Decision-Making

With 20+ years of superintendency experience, Kevin Case, Superintendent of Douglas School District 51-1 in Box Elder, South Dakota, has used every type of engagement and survey process imaginable to gather his community's feedback on everything from strategic direction, to leadership transitions, to bonds and levies. He has a lot of experience with special interests and quiet constituents, and he values ThoughtExchange's ability to level the playing field in community engagement.

"One of the things I truly love about ThoughtExchange is that the loudest voice in the room doesn't resonate," he explains. "The beauty of an Exchange is everyone in the room has an equal voice. It also allows us to find a common language. We might use a word as educators our community is unfamiliar with because they use a different word for the same thing."

Using ThoughtExchange as an engagement and survey platform at Douglas SD builds equity into how Case hears from his staff, students, and community members. Not only can his leadership team base their decision-making on data that's more inclusive of the district's population, but it also provides them with language that promotes a sense of community ownership over their decisions.

"The smartest person in the room—is the room," says Case. "And you need a way to get the feedback that allows you to leverage the knowledge in the room. The tool to do that is ThoughtExchange."

[Read the full story →](#)

Plan to enhance and broaden access to community feedback

“The signs of authentic engagement: The community is not seen as the problem but as a partner in defining the problem.”

– [THE SUPERINTENDENT’S FIELDBOOK](#)

Building on your community engagement strategy, an engagement plan that reimagines how your district connects with its community is essential for any initiative’s success. Partner with your community in participatory decision-making—and meet them where they are.

A [community engagement plan](#) outlines outreach and public participation activities, including assigned roles and timelines for new or reoccurring projects that will impact the community.

Where your strategy explains why your district will need specific resources and will take specific actions, your plan will outline the steps to achieve the strategy.

Consider your project’s purpose and objectives, conduct a community analysis, decide on engagement methods, and work through potential risks and challenges. Armed with your step-by-step plan, you’ll be ready to tackle your district’s most pressing issues—and succeed.

As mentioned earlier, some common challenges to successful engagement include a lack of trust in leadership, inaccessible tech, and a lack of awareness about projects. To mitigate these, listen to your community and act on their insights—a well-thought-out plan provides the key.



Create a successful community engagement plan

Whatever issue you’re addressing—from capacity building to enhancing relationships—you’ll need your community’s input to succeed. While they’ll help define your plan’s objectives and purpose by telling you what they want and need, they’ll also determine its success by providing support throughout the process.

TIP

Consult your people before, during, and after launching your project for optimal results.

“We’ve used ThoughtExchange for more than 5 years now, and for us, it’s more than a survey tool. ThoughtExchange is a huge asset and a fuel for conversations within our district leadership as we continuously strategize how best to serve our students.”

ALIA WILSON,

Communications Coordinator, Sunnyvale School District

8 things your community engagement plan needs

Although your plans will vary based on the project or initiative, consider adding these **key components**:

| WHAT TO INCLUDE | WHY IT MATTERS | HOW TO DO IT BETTER |
|---|---|--|
| Project background info and historical context | <p>Include project context and previous, relevant community engagement learnings.</p> <p>You might already have the information you're after. If so, build on that to ensure you're not doing the work twice.</p> | <p>Consider using software that allows you to build qualitative data sets and compare engagement results before, during, and after a project.</p> |
| Defined purpose and objectives | <p>Why are you engaging the community, and what do you hope to achieve?</p> <p>This will determine your engagement methods, help evaluate your engagement activities, and measure success.</p> | <p>Determine whether you need a quantitative data tool, such as a survey, whether your plan will benefit from qualitative community members insights, or both.</p> <p>Incorporating staff, student, and parent voices can ensure your plan—and your leadership—is highly supported by your community partners.</p> |
| Community analysis | <p>Who's invested in this project, and who will it impact? Also, how engaged are they, and what will they contribute?</p> <p>Understanding your community helps determine the appropriate engagement methods.</p> | <p>Consider a community engagement software that allows you to gather quantitative data on your audience with survey questions while also gathering qualitative data.</p> <p>Discover how engaged they are and ask them how they want to engage. This way, you can tailor communications according to their individual engagement level and preference.</p> |
| Engagement methods | <p>What are the most appropriate engagement methods, and how will you ensure you're engaging a diverse range of community members?</p> <p>Standard methods are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys • Meetings • Town halls <p>Keep in mind that methods requiring travel or mobility, time off work, English fluency, and comfort with public speaking may limit the perspectives you capture.</p> | <p>An easy-to-use digital collective intelligence platform can increase community participation over standard methods.</p> <p>Ensure it includes Classic Survey and Exchange capabilities. It should also have multilingual capabilities and be accessible on any device, anytime. Anonymous participation and the ability to reflect on each other's input are also key to mitigating bias.</p> <p>This will allow you to capture more voices and create more inclusive, equitable conversations.</p> |

| WHAT TO INCLUDE | WHY IT MATTERS | HOW TO DO IT BETTER |
|--|--|---|
| Key messages and communication strategy | <p>What will you tell your community about your project and consultation activities? Carefully consider your key messages and communication activities.</p> <p>Lack of/unclear communication can be a major barrier to your plan's success.</p> | <p>Communicate early and often about your intentions and what your community can expect. Let them know their insights have an impact. Then follow up to show how the plan leverages their insights. This creates support and buy-in for your plan.</p> |
| Risks, challenges, and solutions | <p>What are the potential risks, their impacts, and how likely are they to occur?</p> <p>Predicting risks will help you come up with solutions.</p> | <p>Common challenges include a lack of trust in leadership, inaccessible tech, and a lack of awareness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to your community • Get the right tech • Communicate early and often |
| Feedback collection and integration | <p>How will you collect and integrate feedback from all engagement methods?</p> <p>Integrating broad community insights makes a stronger, more successful plan.</p> | <p>While engaging with your community, continually evaluate outcomes. Adjust and improve efforts as needed.</p> <p>Listen to your community and act on their insights. Conduct regular check-ins to determine if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You're reaching the intended audience • The data is actionable • The engagement level is high |
| Evaluation | <p>Did you meet your plan's engagement purpose and objectives? What worked well, and what learnings can you apply to your next community project?</p> <p>Be ready to reassess and pivot with your community's support to help your current and future plans succeed.</p> | <p>Check in with your community after you've implemented the plan, and they've had time to assess the impact. Make appropriate changes based on their feedback.</p> <p>Use community engagement software that lets you include 10-10,000+ people, depending on your needs</p> |

“We morphed a very narrow, specific goal into something that was more holistic and focused on the whole child. Having the support of parents through the Exchange was really helpful in getting us there.”

CATHERINE CARBONE-ROGERS,
Chief Communications Officer, Highline Public Schools

Prioritize efficiency and effectiveness in engagement software

Tapping into your community's voice is a big win for any communications professional. But whether you're building your strategy or nailing down your plan, the right tech will make things easier. Comprehensive [engagement and survey software](#) gets you from insights to action faster, engaging thousands of community members while tackling your district's most critical issues.

Why you need the right software

Whether you're working on a strategy or plan, performance or culture initiatives—the right software will help you achieve your goals more quickly. Engagement software streamlines your engagement initiatives and allows communications professionals to gather feedback and [get alignment](#) from tens, hundreds, or even thousands of people in just days. It also facilitates candid, collaborative community conversations that help districts realize their goals by increasing the participants' trust, buy-in, and ownership of district decisions.

The right engagement software helps to empower communications professionals to make more effective decisions using their community's insights, support, and language. With so much riding on community support for district projects and funding, leaders need a platform that will get them better participation and more nuanced data.

Community engagement software lets you get input from hundreds or thousands of people. Use it to:

- Get more people on board with [bonds and levies](#)
- Save weeks on your [LCAP surveys](#) and data-crunching
- Make [budget decisions](#) the community supports
- Find [common ground](#) on divisive issues



Old school vs next-gen engagement

Traditional community engagement consists of cascading information out and survey data in, but these methods often fail to do what has been the backbone of human civilization for centuries—inclusively and meaningfully discussing the issues that affect us all. This is because it can feel impossible to scale a discussion across thousands of community members, and too unstructured to create actionable insights.

A next-gen engagement and survey platform like [ThoughtExchange](#) will allow you to integrate your strategy with your community and take decisive, supported action in less time. By basing engagement on community discussions—like scaled focus groups—an Exchange allows you to gather diverse perspectives and build an understanding of why certain issues are important to your district and how different community members experience them. It also provides planning, scheduling, and analysis tools to help you quickly set strategy and monitor execution.

“ThoughtExchange takes the heart and soul of qualitative research—the data analysis and theming process—and drastically reduces the time that’s spent on it. We’re saving weeks and weeks of work just because we have this platform.”

MICHAEL GOMEZ, Ed.D.,

Former District Coordinator of Assessment, Accountability, and New Teacher Induction for SVUSD

Choosing the right engagement software

Not all engagement platforms are created equal. There are many options, like online polls, virtual meetings and townhalls, surveys, and more. There are pros and cons to consider before committing to one.



Types of community engagement software—pros and cons

| | Pros | Cons |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Online polls | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Easy to set up ✓ Easy to participate in ✓ Quick answer to simple question ✓ Engages large groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Surface-level data—no insight into why participants respond a certain way ✗ Answers are pre-selected and subject to bias ✗ Can't measure response intensity or sentiment |
| Virtual meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Free for up to 100 participants ✓ Open forum for discussion (particularly for smaller groups) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Can't be scaled and still maintain quality of conversation ✗ Zoom fatigue ✗ Paid plans for over 100 participants ✗ Requires note-taking and recording for later analysis ✗ Requires time off work or parenting to participate |
| Standalone surveys | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Easy to set up ✓ Easy to participate in ✓ Quick answers to simple questions ✓ Engages large groups ✓ Offers quantitative and qualitative question options | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Surface-level data—no insight into why participants respond a certain way ✗ Answers to close-ended questions are pre-selected and subject to bias ✗ Answers to open-ended questions must be manually analyzed ✗ No transparency for participants into how others in the community have answered and why ✗ Usually just the first step in engagement, followed by weeks of focus groups and data analysis |

| | Pros | Cons |
|--|--|---|
| ThoughtExchange: engagement and survey platform | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Easy to set up and distribute✓ Easy to participate in from any device at any time✓ Scales easily from 10 to 10,000+ participants✓ Offers both quantitative Classic Survey technology and qualitative Exchange capabilities✓ Ask one open-ended question to get thousands of quality responses✓ Access people's real thoughts and insights✓ Supports 100+ languages in one Exchange✓ Anti-bias technology ensures participants and leaders engage ideas on merit, not on who's sharing them✓ Built-in AI analytics provide rich data as the conversation unfolds✓ Richer and deeper analysis of qualitative data✓ Cross-analysis of quantitative survey data and qualitative Exchange data✓ Easy-to-use and accessible to users of all skill sets✓ Expert support✓ AI and manual data analysis is done in minutes or hours instead of weeks✓ Easy to export reports, presentations, and HTML pages for sharing results with participants and leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✗ Leaders can't control participant responses✗ Requires trust and transparency from leaders✗ Costs are up front, but saves immense time and money in the long run |



A comprehensive engagement initiative requires comprehensive software. Communications professionals need tools and platforms to help them foster a mutually beneficial relationship with their community. Next, we'll look at how communications professionals in education are using next-gen engagement software in their districts.



Create equity at scale through better engagement

As a company that works with communications professionals across North America, we hear again and again that the current political climate is leading to misinformation and conflict regarding instructional materials and practices. Unfortunately, many traditional engagement methods only exacerbate the problem of polarization in communities.

“Had we engaged the community differently, we likely would have only experienced majority thinking and in a very limited way.”

DR. KEVIN MCGOWAN,

*Winner of National Superintendent of the Year 2023,
and Superintendent at Brighton Central School District*

Here are some of the ways traditional engagement methods exclude community members:



Climate Surveys

These surveys can be pages long, requiring time to fill out, and they often lead to “survey exhaustion” in the community. They usually only ask about specific issues district leaders prioritize. They often don’t allow community members to share their own concerns or questions, and if they do, their comments are only shared with leadership and not with other participants. Translation services are needed for certain community members. Data analysis can take weeks.



Townhalls & Meetings

Attendance requires time off work or free time and sometimes travel. Attendees must be willing to speak publicly and be fluent in the predominant language if there is no translator available. These types of engagement can be dominated by special interests who are highly motivated to push a certain issue or agenda, but do not represent the interests of all community members. Data analysis can take weeks.



Focus Groups

Like with townhalls and meetings, attendance requires time off work or free time and sometimes travel. Attendees must be willing to speak publicly and be fluent in the predominant language if there is no translator available. There can be bias present in group selection, and the data may not represent the community well. Data analysis can take weeks.

“Previously, we’ve looked at language as a barrier to participation, but that was blown out of the water by using ThoughtExchange to engage different groups and educational partners in our district.”

MICHAEL GOMEZ, Ed.D.,

Former District Coordinator of Assessment, Accountability, and New Teacher Induction for SVUSD

Ensure equitable community engagement

If your community engagement methods don't prioritize inclusivity and diversity of perspectives and experiences, the resulting decisions will only make polarization worse in your district. It's vital that whatever engagement methods and software you go with, it includes the following:

- **Qualitative and quantitative data-gathering**
Open-ended questions with participant ratings help get the most accurate qualitative data from the group. Survey questions can access quick data and also be cross-analyzed with qualitative data.
- **Multi-language capabilities**
Simultaneous translation so community members can participate in their preferred language.
- **Topic theming**
Tools to quickly sort participant responses by keyword or sentiment, and offer both manual and AI theming tools.
- **Areas of agreement**
Identifies both differences and common ground among polarized groups so you base your decisions on data everyone supports.

Here's how three communications leaders engaged their communities more effectively by leveraging these features.

Woodland D50 uses open-ended questions to get district better data

As the pandemic took its toll on [Woodland School District 50](#) in Lake County, IL, Superintendent Dr. Lori Casey, Communications Manager Brooke Hagstrom, and the Board of Education knew that parent and caregiver feedback would be key to making it through COVID-19.



After using a survey and focus groups to plan their hybrid remote learning strategy for the 2020/2021 school year, some parents complained that the survey didn't ask the right questions and the focus groups weren't tapping into a wide enough range of insights.

So, Dr. Casey and Hagstrom used ThoughtExchange, leveraging open-ended questions so parents could share their children's specific needs instead of voting on predetermined options.

They asked:

To help with our planning efforts for next year, please consider the following question: As we wrap up this very unique school year, what do you want us to know about your child's learning experience?

On their own, surveys invite participants to share one-way feedback, providing surface-level data, which is sometimes all that's needed. But paired with an Exchange, leaders can leverage their community's collective intelligence in an interactive conversation, getting nuanced insights and elevated data. With ThoughtExchange, you don't just ask—you listen. And your participants listen to each other, too.

“[With traditional surveys], we spent so much time trying to figure out the correct wording, and there were all these different interpretations of why it wasn't asking the right questions. [But] ThoughtExchange helps us be proactive and move our communications forward.”

BROOKE HAGSTROM,
Communications Manager, Woodland School District 50

Blue Valley uses Themes to get qualitative data through a quantitative lens

Blue Valley Schools encompasses 91 square miles in southeastern Johnson County, Kansas, serving 23,000 students in total. Students identify 90 different languages as their primary home language.

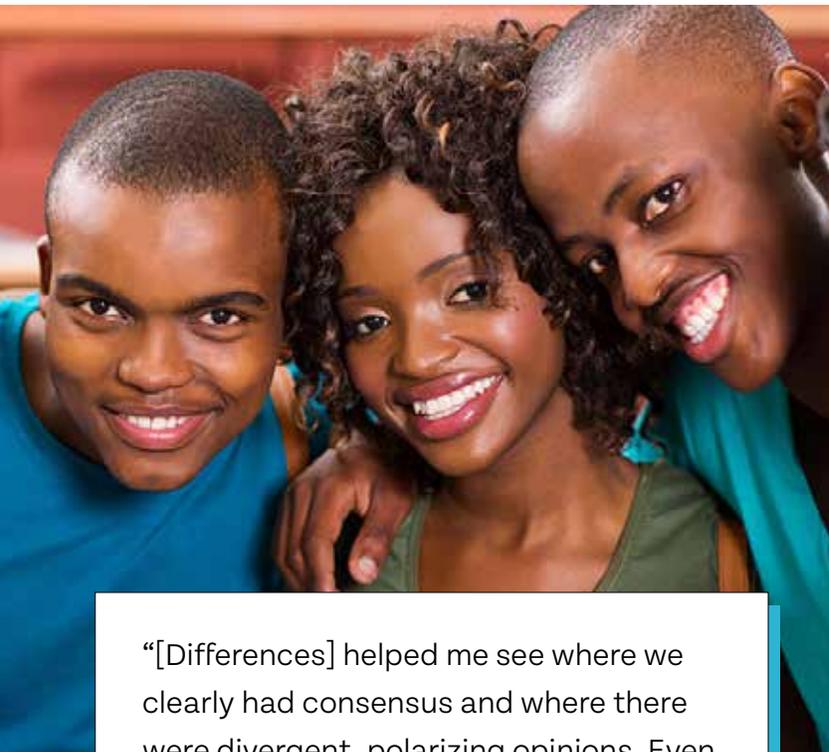
Blue Valley strives to support its community in communication, academics, and social-emotional well-being. But, as Kristi McNerlin, Chief Communications Officer, says, support begins with hearing what the community has to say.

By using a multi-language Exchange, Blue Valley Schools went beyond making participants feel heard. When paired with simple yet powerful tools such as Themes, the Exchange results provided better data to work with.



“With ThoughtExchange, people really feel strongly about their ability to voice where they’re coming from. That’s the difference between ThoughtExchange and a standard survey. Participants really feel like they can share their thoughts.”

KRISTI MCNERLIN,
Chief Communications Officer, Blue Valley Schools



“[Differences] helped me see where we clearly had consensus and where there were divergent, polarizing opinions. Even in the ratings of other people’s opinions, we very quickly saw where we had agreement and where we didn’t. It’s a great tool for building consensus.”

CHRIS PAYNE,
Chief Communications Officer, Union Public Schools

Differences helps Union Public Schools build consensus for controversial mascot change

In 2020, **Union Public Schools** proposed a change to their mascot. **Eight core values** guide Union Public Schools, and the mascot violated three of them:

- Inclusiveness, cultivating an organizational culture of accepting children, families, and employees for who they are rather than categorizing them by income, ethnicity, or ability;
- Collegiality, demonstrating respect and an ability to work as team members;
- and Empowerment, helping people reach their full potential.

Knowing they’d need their community’s input to succeed, they used ThoughtExchange. Chris Payne, Chief Communications Officer, was concerned the conversation might become divisive, but ThoughtExchange’s anti-bias technology and anonymous rating system ensured the mascot change didn’t become contentious. Payne also used the Differences tool to analyze and compare groups of polarizing ratings.

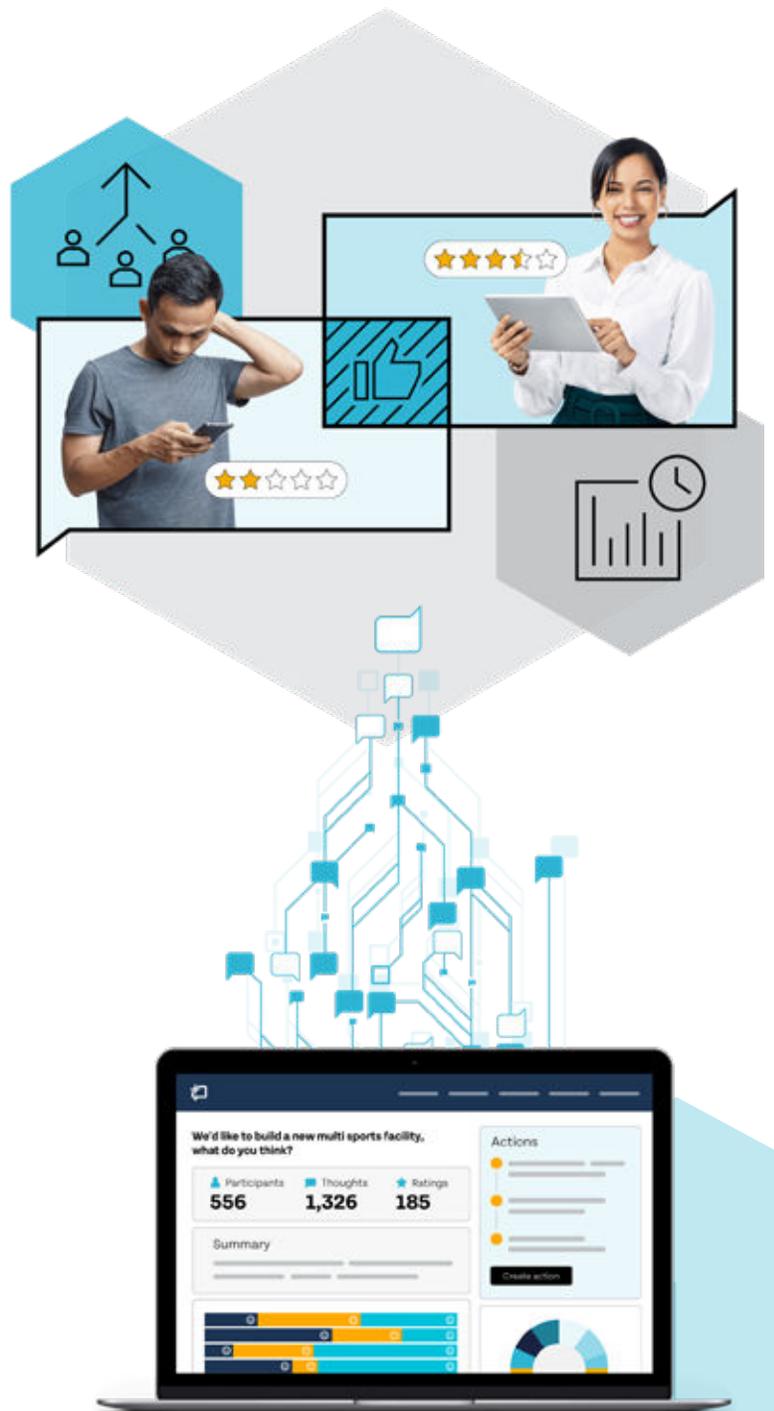
Engage your community with ThoughtExchange

Whatever challenges your district is facing, your community has the solution. With a robust community engagement strategy, an on-point plan, and the right engagement and survey platform, you can effectively engage your community to create positive change in your district.

“[Using ThoughtExchange] saves time and money. I know for a fact that ThoughtExchange has saved us months. If I had had to collect information and go back out and share it—the way ThoughtExchange dynamically takes all of that [input] and people can then rate it. That takes out a lot of steps.”

CHRIS PAYNE,
Chief Communications Officer, Union Public Schools

ThoughtExchange is the leader in engagement and survey technology, bringing communications professionals like you next-gen community engagement solutions.



Contact us to learn more. We're happy to answer your questions, share pricing information, and explore use cases for your team.

CONTACT US

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