



Tools of Engagement



Online software gives parents a voice in prioritizing K-12 stimulus spending

BY MATTHEW M. LENTZ AND CHRIS ADAMS

For school districts in which parents want a stronger voice in prioritizing pandemic-related stimulus funds, technology can play an important role in communication and dialogue, which ultimately makes for better decisions.

According to a poll conducted last fall by the National Parents Union, 51 percent of 1,006 parents surveyed said they should be included in the decision-making process that determines how federal funding is spent to address pandemic-related challenges.¹ The same percentage of respondents felt they knew “not much/ nothing at all” about plans for those funds, while just 13 percent said they have heard a lot, indicating a need for further education in the community.

At the same time, the pandemic has accelerated the use of online civic engagement tools to help foster conversations about government and

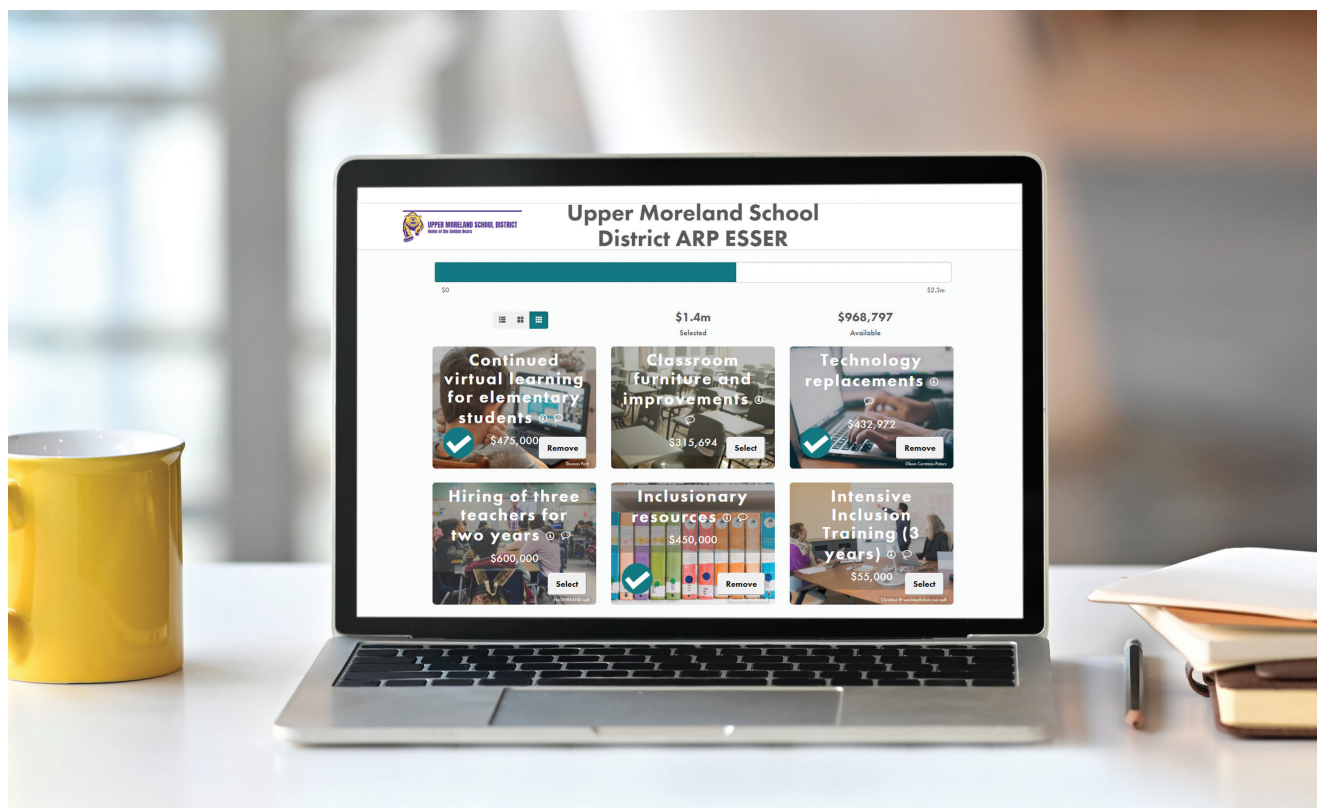
school budgets in accessible and constructive ways. In addition to—or rather than, in some cases—attending a public meeting, parents can use their smartphones or other connected devices to provide input via online software and do it on their own time, at their convenience. COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing measures have also increased acceptance of online civic engagement practices and increased comfort levels with online software and meeting technologies.

For the Upper Moreland Township School District in Pennsylvania, online public engagement software provided a new way to reach parents and stakeholders to improve communication and define community priorities for stimulus funds. The district was also able to collect demographic information about who completed the survey, based on zip codes. Information from the district’s case study is presented below.

Pandemic relief funds pose new challenges and choices

Education has been one of the economic areas hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report from the Economic Policy Institute, more public education jobs were lost in April 2020 than during the Great Recession.² The effects of classroom closures across the country were ubiquitous: The pandemic widened pre-existing gaps for disadvantaged students, exacerbated mental health issues, and fueled widespread learning loss, the ripple effects of which have yet to be fully seen.

To date, the U.S. Congress has passed six relief packages aimed at combating economic fallout from the pandemic, three of which include funding for elementary and secondary schools. From March 2020 through March 2021, Congress funneled nearly \$190 billion into K-12 funding (called ESSER, short for Elementary and



Secondary School Emergency Relief], a historic federal infusion for schools.

While these funds provide a much-needed lifeline for school districts and local governments, they come with new hurdles. Faced with an unprecedented cash influx in response to the pandemic, local governments and community leaders must now determine how to invest the money smartly and equitably. The financial holes formed over the past two years represent only part of the picture—students experienced devastating learning loss, slashed budgets created waves of staffing layoffs, and the vitality of school aid programs was threatened. Treasury guidelines described in the Federal Register, while relatively flexible to account for range of usage, urge that school districts engage constituents and communities in developing plans for using these payments.³

Challenge turned opportunity

Located in Montgomery County, north of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Upper Moreland Township is primarily a residential community. The Upper Moreland Township School District (UMTSD) encompasses four schools, 3,200 students, and approximately 200 classroom teachers. In March 2020, UMTSD, along with all other Pennsylvania schools, shut classroom doors for the foreseeable future due to COVID-19. Like the rest of the country, UMTSD faced an uncertain future—there were no guidelines for how to proceed in the present, and the district was concerned over the challenges it would face down the line.

In August 2020, Pennsylvania announced that schools would reopen under new guidelines. Going back to the classroom now meant social distancing, wearing masks,

and screening for symptoms upon entrance.⁴ And the decision to reopen was not uncontested. According to a non-scientific poll in Pennsylvania, approximately 43 percent of the state thought students should “absolutely not” return for in-person learning in the fall; 39 percent said students “definitely” should, and about 18 percent were unsure.⁵ Nationwide, the Peterson Foundation found that 6 in 10 Americans opposed going back to in-person learning in their states.⁶

The new restrictions produced a challenging environment for daily operations but also revealed new needs that could be addressed by stimulus funds. Much of the challenge would be finding common ground among those who opposed school reopening and those who supported it, so stimulus funding needed to satisfy both sides while addressing the core issues at hand.



The Upper Moreland Township School District used online public engagement software to seek stakeholder input in prioritizing the district's \$2.3 million ESSER funding.

For UMTSD, ESSER funding represented an opportunity, not an obstacle. In June 2021, UMTSD began using an online public engagement software tool to reach out to parents and community members.

Deploying an online tool for engagement

This online software makes it faster and easier for cities, counties, school districts, and other agencies to customize an interactive page presenting information and graphics that easily gathers input from parents and other stakeholders about the allocation of one-time or fixed budgetary expenses. UMTSD's

interactive page featured a selection of possible uses for \$2.3 million from ESSER, which mandates public engagement and often documentation of the engagement process.

Upper Moreland's online public engagement tool contained 11 possible selections for its \$2.3 million in ESSER funding, ranging from improving classroom furniture (\$315,000) to hiring three teachers for two years (\$600,000) to intensive inclusion training for staff (\$450,000). The selections were presented as 11 tiles with images, dollar allocation amounts, and descriptions providing context for how the money would be used. Users then made selections until all the money was allocated and then ranked their choices. A final page requests additional information (which is optional) including age range, zip code, email address, and physical

address, as well as an opportunity to reorder selections, before the user presses "submit." The information was then compiled to provide the district with a prioritization of funding allocation preferences.

From district to household: the two-way street for public engagement

Methods of community engagement for school districts have long been rooted in traditional back-to-school nights or parent-teacher conferences. For many districts, groups like Parent Teacher Associations or other parent-teacher organizations are the main funnel for parental input. These parent-led organizations facilitate outside participation and are often responsible for representing the views of parents and guardians at the school.

Increasingly, school budget decisions are seeking structured input from community stakeholders. During the pandemic, many districts turned to online meetings to allow virtual participation, as well as online surveys and community forums. UMTSD had used Google Forms as an online survey method, but simple surveys through generic tools like Google Forms are hard to manage and have many limitations for large public engagement efforts.

Traditional survey design also rarely shows the impacts of financial tradeoffs and often lacks enough specificity to provide useful feedback. One national survey, for example, asked parents to mark more than a dozen options for federal spending as a high or low priority, and when the results were tallied, almost every item had been selected as a high priority.⁷

On the other hand, interactive tools emphasize and educate parents about trade-offs, as selecting one item will often result in forfeiting another. Spending selections are also narrowly focused. UMTSD parents weren't given "school improvements" as a priority; instead, they had to decide between specific elements within



51% of parents want to be included in decision-making about how to spend federal funding to address pandemic-related challenges.

SOURCE: NATIONAL PARENTS UNION SURVEY, ECHELON INSIGHTS

the category such as investing in personal protective equipment or new classroom furniture. This provided the district with fine-tuned feedback that pinpointed the areas where parents most wanted to receive funds, and the district knew its decisions accounted for both the monetary and opportunity costs of a particular item.

The feedback from Upper Moreland stakeholders also helped refine the district's communication efforts by identifying disconnects in the community. Because community members who used the tool provided a residential zip code, the district could pinpoint parts of the community that needed more targeted communications or time. The demographics also provided a way to tie in the district's goal of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as the documentation required for ESSER—and then some.

UMTSD also wanted to use the tool to promote dialogue. Meetings became more focused because the resulting data could be easily accessed to provide reference points. The district wanted the community to have a broad vision, but emotions often get in the way of facts. The information gained from the interactive tool allowed UMTSD to set parameters, but not handcuff people. The data also revealed low-ranking items that needed more learning time. For example, UMTSD was surprised when its summer school program, which

doubles as childcare, ranked as a low priority for funding, revealing that the district needs to provide more education and increase awareness in the community about the advantages this program provides. As a result, the district considered options for the next summer, including offering a virtual summer program that is more flexible in nature, in response to the feedback.

More broadly, the program provided a new perspective for school district leaders. While other school districts will likely find value in the tool for different reasons, in UMTSD's case, it highlighted disconnects in communication and demonstrated the need for more education around the difficult funding allocation decisions school district leaders face. With a K-12 education landscape that has been changed by the pandemic, having an online prioritization portal has improved the district's ongoing budget discussions, along with other changes to reach the widest range of stakeholders.

Conclusion

Engaging stakeholders has become more crucial than ever in the COVID-19 era. How districts spend their stimulus funds now will have implications for years to come, representing a pivotal period of change. Alongside the challenges brought on by the pandemic, we also have an opportunity to fill pre-existing gaps,

invest in infrastructure, and address the issues systematically rooted in our school districts. But we cannot move forward in a truly beneficial way without the support of our communities. As online engagement tools continue to improve, they increasingly provide school districts with important information for making good decisions and allocating stimulus money.⁸

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¹ "National Parents Union Survey of 1,006 parents of public-school students in grades kindergarten through 12th grade," Echelon Insights, Sept. 9 to 13, 2021.

² Elise Gould, "Public education job losses in April are already greater than in all of the Great Recession," Economic Policy Institute, June 30, 2021.

³ Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, Supplementary Information, Federal Register, May 17, 2021.

⁴ Kara Seymour, "Should PA Schools Reopen? Here's What Nearly 11k Residents Think," Patch, July 15, 2020.

⁵ Kara Seymour, "PA Issues Updated School Reopening Guidance," Patch, July 16, 2020.

⁶ "Voter Views on School Reopening, Vaccine Availability and Economic Recovery," the Peterson Foundation, August 18, 2020.

⁷ op cit, Echelon Insights.