



## **GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY**

# Examining Open Government at the Education Department

by Farrah Stone Graham

Transparency creates the openness and connection to the people and stakeholders that is necessary for the government to respond to its constituents.

**On his first day in office**, President Obama signed the Memorandum for Transparency and Open Government, and a year later, in December 2009, issued the Open Government Directive for federal agencies. The president's main purposes are to increase transparency, participation, and collaboration and to strengthen democracy, efficiency, and effectiveness in government.

The Department of Education has answered this charge by developing its own plan and implementing a number of innovative efforts to satisfy the first set of purposes. However, if the department hopes to satisfy the second set, namely strengthening democracy, then a necessary element is missing from the conceptualization process: creating responsiveness.

When thinking of building accountability structures, transparency is the first, necessary step, but it is not the only goal. Transparency creates the openness and connection to the people and stakeholders that is necessary for the government to respond to its constituents. But we need to create transparency with a purpose, which feeds into and helps create other dimensions of accountability. We also want the functions of government to serve our desired purposes, which is responsiveness.

We can think of responsiveness in two ways: answering the demands of the people or meeting the needs of the people. Answering the demands of people requires understanding their preferences and how they view the services being provided. The people's needs are defined by another entity, such as the legislature, through policy goals. A responsive government meets people's needs by achieving policy goals. Ideally, these efforts should create positive perceptions of the agency in the public's eyes. They also should lend themselves to both internal and external accountability.

## Keeping the Department of Education Accountable

Accountability is a significant issue at the Department of Education because the services of the agency are tangible to, and affect, a majority of Americans. The public has a perception of the agency, informed or not, that can serve as a baseline for determining the effectiveness of accountability and responsiveness efforts. The department has not fared well in the public's view, especially recently.

In April 2010, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released its poll, "The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger, and Partisan Rancor." This study examines the national public's views on government in general, as well as on agencies such as the Department of Education. When asked to rate the job being done on a scale of excellent to poor, 64 percent of the respondents answered only fair or poor. Looking at perceptions over time, the department has seen a decrease in favorability rating from 61 percent to 40 percent for the period of 1997-98 to 2010. This 21-percentage point decrease was the largest decline of all of the agencies listed in the question. To improve the public's perception, the department will have to create transparency projects that indicate to the public that their demands are understood and being met.

The department has implemented and planned numerous projects aimed at transparency, participation, and collaboration. Much of the work on transparency has focused on making the data at the department available to interested parties, researchers, and average citizens.

Three transparency initiatives stand out:

1. The department created ED Data Express to provide easy access to state-level data on public education and accountability standards. It is serving as a centralized data information source, and the new system is making it easier for parents, teachers, and researchers to access the information.
2. To foster participation, the department created the open government steering committee, which is seeking strategies to hold more open meetings and acquire more public input in internal meetings.
3. The open innovation portal—a web-based community connecting education practitioners, parents, non-profits, and funding organizations—also provides a place to propose innovative strategies for dealing with issues in education today. A goal of the portal is to develop and encourage collaboration.

These transparency projects use innovative methods of interaction, such as web-based database applications, online wiki tools for policy document creation, and such social media platforms as Twitter and Facebook to create participation forums.

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**Ultimately, agency efforts toward external accountability should create positive perceptions of the agency in the public's eyes.**

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But external accountability is not just about enabling participation, it is about meeting the demands of the citizens. What is the public demanding from the Department of Education? The answer may be different for different groups of people. However, it is imperative that the organization knows the full range of answers and uses that information to shape what it is doing and how it is doing it.

The department has used its participation efforts to gain knowledge about citizen preferences. The open government steering committee hosted a series of forums with school representatives, state and local governments, and others on specific policy issues such as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Race to the Top, and the FY2011 budget request.

The committee also has used a number of technology-based tools to gather input from the public and

department employees. For example, Ideascale is a web conversation-management tool that has been used by the committee to gather feedback on the open government plan. The published plan allows readers to comment and view the comments of others in each section online. The committee also plans to use blogs, the web-based comment system, and moderated Twitter feeds to increase participation in department meetings.

What is less clear in the reporting is how the department will incorporate this new information into policy and action. The open government plan only states that the input is used throughout the plan document and lists the number of comments received in certain venues. While participation is important in a democratic society, *what* citizens are participating in and how that input is being used makes the difference.

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If you ask for input on an existing question, you may gain support for the alternative chosen. When asking for input into which question to ask, you gain support for the entire endeavor. The department that knows which question the public wants to ask or where the public thinks a policy should be developed is going to better manage public demands and perceptions.

Participation will support creating responsiveness if it informs the organization on the demands of its citizen constituents. Then transparency efforts are the vehicle for communicating whether the demands have been met. That is the information that will move the needle on the public's perception of the agency. It is not just accomplishing something; it's accomplishing what the public thought it should.

Of course, policy directives can't just come from public opinion. The department will still have to accomplish priorities set by Congress and the President. It is responsible for the organizational performance as well as internally accounting for its own responsiveness to well-defined public and stakeholder needs.

## Disseminating Education Outputs vs. Outcomes

It is important to distinguish between outputs and outcomes when measuring performance. An output is the tangible result of the work process. For example, the output of teaching a first-grade class may be the number of children taught or the number of hours a teacher spent in the classroom. An outcome is the desired social change resulting from a program. Using the same example, the outcome of teaching that first-grade class would be the learning the children acquired. Being accountable to citizens means proving that citizens' needs are met. Outcomes determine when needs are being met, not outputs.

Too often transparency initiatives rely on greater dissemination of existing information, which generally is output-based. To foster effectiveness and responsiveness, programs need to define performance in terms of outcomes, or needs met, and this should be the information provided through transparency.

One of the department's goals, outlined in its June 2011 study "Flagship Initiative, Transparency: ED Data Express" is to "foster more

transparency in the larger educational community." It remains to be seen how that is going to be measured effectively. The open government self-review document states that the measurement for the department's data express initiative will be the number of datasets provided and a system-based usage count.

These metrics, while important to know, are outputs, not outcomes. They do not tell the public whether that goal was reached. Of course, outcomes are harder to measure and generally require additional data to be gathered. But the effort will pay off in proving that the department has met the defined needs.

An example of outcome-oriented data comes from the SchoolView project in Colorado, which provides state level education performance data in a user-friendly web-based format using interactive dashboards, maps, and graphs. What makes this effort different is that Colorado is using SchoolView for the state's new Education Accountability System and will use it to develop new improvement strategies. The distinction is that the data management system is the underpinning of the

accountability system, not the end result. What will matter to the public are the improvement strategies and the impact that they have, not the data management system. (See 2010 winter issue, p. 18.)

As they are in Colorado and other states, the Department of Education's innovative tools have to be used as part of the improvement process. This is beginning to happen, but the improved outcomes resulting from transparency initiatives need to be reported to the public as well.

## Needing Innovations to Yield Indicators

Agencies must be deliberate in defining the purposes that innovative technology and communication initiatives serve, because they are often costly in terms of human and monetary resources. Additionally, administrators must focus on gaining input that defines the public's demands of the agency. What purpose does the public think the agency should serve?

The answer may not include all of the program functions mandated by law. If the public seeks greater

attention to and support for existing programs, the agency should show the public how its input is being used, not just how many people participated.

Agencies should use transparency efforts to strengthen internal accountability as well. The department should define performance measures for transparency efforts that are outcome-based and indicate that the defined needs are being met. This process will require more work and resources, but it also will provide indicators of true program success. This open government initiative offers the opportunity to not just create transparency and engage citizens, but also to achieve the mission of the Department of Education.

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<http://community.thepublicmanager.org/cs/blogs/featured/archive/2010/12/14/improving-educational-accountability-in-colorado.aspx>



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