

Exploring New Modalities of Public Engagement

An Evaluation of Digital Gaming Platforms on
Civic Capacity and Collective Action in the Boston
Public School District

Authors

Jyoti Gupta & Jassica Bouvier, Public Agenda
Eric Gordon, Engagement Game Lab

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Introduction

During the summer and fall of 2011 the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Office of Accountability began collaboration with the Engagement Game Lab (EGL) at Emerson College in Boston to explore new mechanisms for public engagement and deliberation on K–12 school reform. Facilitated by the Boston Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics, the partnership designed and convened a multi-week digital and in-person engagement initiative called Community PlanIt (CPI). Through funding from the Kettering Foundation, Public Agenda conducted an evaluation of the BPS and CPI pilot. This report covers Community PlanIt, which spanned the four weeks from September 20 to October 20; the face-to-face deliberative Town Hall, which took place on October 20; and the outcomes of these two experiences.

CPI is an online ,game platform designed to foster collaboration and engagement in planning processes. The project was funded by the Knight Foundation as part of the Technology for Engagement initiative. An early pilot game of the platform was created with the Public Schools district and the Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics in Boston. This pilot game is the focus of this evaluation. We will refer to this game generally as Community PlanIt (CPI) throughout. CPI was focused on generating local knowledge and experience to inform the strategies and decisions ultimately developed by BPS for implementation in the school system. Embedded within CPI are engaging and fun activities intended to strengthen local communities through information sharing, collaborative review, and consensus-building opportunities.

The goals of CPI were twofold. First, BPS wanted to collect the opinions and input of a wide range of stakeholders on issues of school accountability and assessment in order to shape the district’s accountability framework and communications strategy about the framework. Second, BPS leadership wanted to experiment with a different means of soliciting input beyond traditional formats of public participation such as Town Hall meetings and public opinion polls.

Public Agenda’s evaluation examined the deliberative quality of CPI from the perspective of game players, developers, and BPS administrators in order to identify which aspects of the platform work well and which need improvement in future applications. Through qualitative research methods, we sought to gain knowledge about whether and how a digital platform impacted the quality of deliberation in face-to-face meetings. Our guiding evaluation questions were:

- 1) To what extent did the gaming platform, Community PlanIt, facilitate meaningful deliberation and engagement on K–12 school reform?
- 2) In what ways, if any, did the augmented deliberation process help or hinder deliberation, democratic decision making, and collective action around K–12 school reform?

These questions were explored through phone and in-person interviews as well as observation. Interviews with ten CPI players, two developers, five BPS administrators, and two other city administrators with knowledge of the project were conducted to gain a better understanding of

the gaming experience, including what was learned, new insights or understandings about the community, satisfaction with structured and unstructured opportunities to provide input, and perceptions of the usefulness of information contributed through the game to facilitate local deliberation. Further, these interviews examined the extent to which participants perceived a change in the quality of deliberations facilitated by the technology. The culminating event of the pilot, the Town Hall meeting, provided an opportunity to observe how the CPI was framed, interactions between administrators and participants, and both the quality and tone of input and feedback.

Background

It is widely recognized that most of the serious issues that make up the 21st-century political landscape are defined by the complex interplay of technical knowledge, political constraints, and values conflicts. As a result, there is a convergence of opinion among scholars, experts, and leaders that traditional methods for navigating this landscape are no longer sufficient for the current demands around public decision making, as well as an emerging consensus that new forms of public participation are both valuable and necessary (Yankelovich, 1991, 2003; Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, Nevitte, and Basáñez, 1996; Macedo, Ed., 1999; Abelson, 2002; Abelson et al., 2003; Leighninger, 2006; Mansbridge, 2005; Gutmann and Thompson, 2009). At the same time, there has been an upsurge of activity among a wide range of practitioners and researchers in the now vibrant field of public participation/public deliberation, and a robust body of theoretical and practical knowledge now exists about the purposes and payoffs of a variety of methods used to increase public participation and public deliberation in decision making (Mansbridge, Gastil, and Levine, Eds., 2005; Heierbacher, 2009; Carcasson, 2009; Fisher, 2009; Forester, 2009).

Despite a vast amount of disagreement and contention regarding the nature, design, and impact of dialogue, most understand political conversation as central to the practice of democracy. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) assert that deliberation “promotes a common citizenship” that enables people to work together in collective action. Barber (1984) argues that the opinion of the individual citizen is most often “slender and provisional,” but when “woven together into a communal will,” gains the capacity to “inspire powerful conviction.” Habermas (1984) investigates the rational-critical debate as a democratic practice, aiming to discover the conditions under which individuals use arguments to guide their decision making. Even within local governing bodies themselves, conversation and engagement among community members is seen as an increasingly vital feature of any properly functioning democratic government. Take Barnes and Mann’s recent study, “Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials’ Views on Public Engagement” (2009), in which 91 percent of municipal officials nationwide are reported to view public engagement processes as producing useful results.

Accordingly, one of the main arteries of debate around deliberative dialogue has centered on a question of design. Scholars have worked to construct deliberative environments and develop a set of norms and practices around deliberation. The work of Mendelberg (2002), Ryfe (2002), Delli Carpini et al. (2004), Mansbridge et al. (2006), Strommer-Galley (2007), and Gastil (2008) have all contributed to a body of literature that provides an underlying set of conditions for deliberative dialogue.

For practitioners, the International Association of Public Participation has become an established and internationally accepted source for a set of principles for authentic and effective public involvement, citizen engagement, and consensus building. The set of core principles of public participation follow:

- Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
- Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
- Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including the decision makers.
- Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
- Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
- Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
- Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

Further, the US-based National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation has developed a set of core principles that reflect the common beliefs and understandings of those working in the fields of public engagement, conflict resolution, and collaboration. The principles have been endorsed by more than 80 organizations connected with the practice of public participation methods, though the application of these principles varies depending on goals and methods.

In recent years, there has been much work done around the use of technology—and digital platforms in particular—to increase the efficacy of public participation and deliberative forums. Importantly, both scholars and practitioners recognize the role that digital engagement can play in augmenting the traditional town hall setting. In particular, practitioners have identified important ways in which digital engagement, when fully integrated into a face-to-face engagement project, offers a unique set of benefits that would not be possible otherwise. For example, experiments with participatory budgeting in Germany have illustrated the effectiveness of digital engagement in recruiting large numbers of participants across demographic boundaries.¹

Although experiments with a variety of participatory online forums have illustrated the great potential of online engagement, there is still much work to be done in expanding and improving the knowledge base of best practices around digital platforms. Gordon and colleagues at the Emerson Game Lab, in Boston, have worked to build this knowledge base by producing work around what has been termed “augmented deliberation.” Briefly defined, augmented deliberation (Gordon and Manosevitch 2010):

- Is a discussion-based activity that balances the affordances of digital technologies with established qualities of face-to-face group discussion.

¹ For more examples of recent digital engagement experiments, see “*Promising Practices in Online Engagement*” (Center for Advances in Public Engagement, Public Agenda, 2009).

- Emphasizes the power of collective experience by enabling deeper inclusion in the discussion. Participants not only meet in face-to-face interaction but also experience the nature of the issue together through the creation and maintenance of digital documentation of the particular issue at hand.
- Promotes sustainability and reproducibility through the creation of a lasting “artifact” of the process, which “can serve as resource and marker” for participants, other community members, and the policy makers at which, in part, the discussion is aimed.

The CPI pilot conducted by BPS and EGL represents a bold application of the augmented deliberation process. EGL is an applied research lab at Emerson College focusing on the development and study of games and social media to enhance civic life. The lab works directly with its partner communities to innovate civic engagement processes, augment stakeholder deliberation, and broaden the diversity of participants in local decision making. Directed by Eric Gordon, EGL has managed three large projects that aim to “get people involved in their neighborhood,” meaning anything from asking people to simply “talk to a neighbor” to inciting people to participate in making “community-based decisions.” EGL’s projects include Participatory Chinatown, a 3-D immersive urban planning game for Boston’s Chinatown²; Hub2, which brought virtual tools and role play into community deliberation; and Community PlanIt, the focus of this evaluation, which utilizes an online engagement platform to elicit public participation in community decision making. Through its projects, EGL does more than just build games; it asks a question central to the future of public engagement in a digital age: How can we use technology to create space for more fruitful deliberative debate on the issues we care about most?

The decision to pilot CPI in the BPS context was prompted by the desire to understand the effectiveness of using a digital platform in engagement activities and, in a more targeted sense, to understand if the tool would be useful in engaging the Boston community around the extremely contentious issue of rezoning.³ There has been a series of attempts on the part of the district to engage the community around K–12 school reform; however, several administrators within BPS share the opinion that in the past not enough has been done to effectively connect with students and families being served by the school system. Indeed, these same administrators believe that communities often feel disengaged by the district administration and that more needs to be done to include parents, students, and other stakeholders in decision making that affects school management.⁴

² See Eric Gordon and Steven Schirra’s recent piece “*Playing with Empathy: Digital Role-Playing in Public Meetings*”, published by Public Agenda’s Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE)), for details.

³ A detailed description of BPS’s experiences with community engagement in school reform and the events leading up to the decision to use CPI can be found in Appendix 1.

⁴ Administrator views and opinions were gathered from one-on-one phone interviews with five distinct BPS administrators in the Office of Accountability, Office of Student and Family Engagement, and Communications Office.

Facing a history of school reform riddled with controversy, racial and socioeconomic tension, and questions about decision making on behalf of all Boston's neighborhoods and families, BPS sought to try a new method of engagement to reach more and different constituencies to inform decision making around two new school measurement systems: the Student Opportunity Index (SOI) and the School Performance Index (SPI). These two indices form the basis for both BPS's school accountability framework and the CPI pilot.

For some within the BPS administration, the motivation to use CPI was its potential to play a significant role in reshaping the nature of public debate around the future of the district. As stated by one administrator, the overall hope would be for CPI to become an institutionalized part of the district's engagement methodology:

I hope that it becomes a tool in our toolbox that we can harness and we get enough people who know the mechanics and can execute it. The hope would be that you could do it [without the direct help of the EGL]. That would take a long time, but we can get even our IT people working on the back and using it.

BPS also hoped to be able to collect qualitative data that could stand alongside the quantitative figures and statistics so often communicated by school systems. For one interviewee within BPS, CPI was a platform for "different ways of communicating, including videos, testimonies, people sharing pictures of different things." The platform would not simply be a "place to vent," but rather an interactive forum for community members to share their ideas and experiences about their school district. To increase the chances of capturing diverse voices, the game was translated into Haitian Creole and Spanish, the most widely spoken languages outside of English in Boston.

The logic model shown in Figure 1 depicts the intended outcomes, both short term and medium/long term, of the BPS CPI pilot and is based on expectations and intentions of the CPI developers, investors, and implementers.

Figure 1. BPS CPI Pilot Logic Model

Inputs →	Actions →	Success Factors →	Short-term Outcomes →	Medium/Long-term Outcomes
<p>Game Lab: Expertise, Staff, Funding, Equipment</p> <p>BPS: Funding, Staff, Events, Facilities/ Schools, Parents, Students</p> <p>City: Funding, Interest/Support</p>	<p>Materials made available to participants (sourcing)</p> <p>Digital technology/Game play</p> <p>Personal meeting/ Face-to-face interaction</p> <p>Communication</p> <p>Facilitation</p> <p>Digital tracking</p>	<p>Solid information base</p> <p>Analytic capacity</p> <p>Areas of disagreement</p> <p>Engagement</p> <p>Equality</p> <p>Shared experience</p> <p>Documented public voice</p>	<p>Increased awareness of problem, solutions, and responsibilities</p> <p>Increased understanding of a complex problem</p> <p>Generation of new information</p> <p>Polarization mitigated</p> <p>Participants examine and have strengthened their own views in a rational way</p> <p>Improved community relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancement/creation of group identity • Increased mutual respect • Enlightened self-interest <p>Improved communication skills</p> <p>More involvement beyond usual suspects</p>	<p>More individual and community action on common problems</p> <p>More collaborative action on common problems</p> <p>Greater self-efficacy and empowerment</p> <p>Institutional impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More legitimate sustainable solutions • Reconsider roles as conveners and catalysts instead of as primary decision makers <p>Increased capacity to take on difficult issues</p>

BPS CPI Pilot Description

Recruitment

Efforts were made to recruit through a number of different channels with varying degrees of success. The main recruitment strategies were:

- In-person recruitment at school-sponsored events such as the Back to School Middle School Orientation (Middle O!) and the citywide Back-to-School Jamboree
- School recruitment through particular teachers and classes as well as through heavy communication with principals at particular schools
 - Utilization of media- and technology-specific courses through an integration of CPI into course curriculum
- Minor outreach to parents at school events and parent meetings
- Minimal marketing through preexisting BPS channels, such as the BPS website

Overall, recruitment took place in pockets, with most heavy recruiting occurring around major system-wide events and more network-based recruiting occurring in schools between BPS administrators and principals, teachers, and students.

Game Play

From September 15, 2011, to October 20th, 2011, community members from within BPS—parents, teachers, students, and administrators—participated in various themed game modules called “missions,” earning PlanIt Tokens to spend on values most important to them.

As previously mentioned, the missions were based around the SPI and SOI developed by the Office of Accountability within BPS. They were designed as metrics to measure school performance over time and were created with the intention of having parents, teachers, students, and other community members provide feedback and insight into their changes and improvements. CPI represented the opportunity for the office to gather the opinions of those learning and working inside the schools. The CPI pilot consists of seven missions in total, the first six encapsulating the six metrics used in the SPI and the seventh encapsulating the SOI in its entirety. Each mission was played over a five-day span; all registered game participants were sent an e-mail alert when a new mission became active in the game. Previous missions could not be retroactively played, but responses could be viewed by all players. The e-mail alerts included short summaries of the previous week’s deliberations, excerpted comments from players, and announcements of any upcoming events related to the project.

On the CPI platform each of the following missions was introduced with a brief student-generated video describing the issue in focus in the mission and its importance to the overall discussion of school performance and opportunities:

- 1) The Path to Graduation and Beyond
- 2) Learning and Academic Growth
- 3) Closing Achievement Gaps
- 4) Improving Attendance
- 5) A Better and Safer School Environment
- 6) Engaging Families and the Community
- 7) Creating Opportunities to Learn

Within each mission, community members responded to questions about their opinions, experiences, values, and priorities as they related to the specific topic. Questions were posed as single-answer multiple choice, multi-answer multiple choice, and open-ended. Players could also upload images and embed video links to elaborate on their written responses. Two other types of questions were integrated into the missions: “empathy questions” to encourage players to imagine how someone else would make a decision given a certain set of conditions, and “mapping questions” to allow players to identify spaces in which action could take place around the issue.

As missions were completed, players earned tokens. These tokens could be saved or spent in any quantity on the players’ values or priorities. The values platform created a collective barometer of the community’s priorities related to K–12 education and school performance. The players could spend tokens on the following values:

- Achievement Gaps
- Attendance
- Family and Community Engagement
- Growth
- Opportunities to Learn
- Proficiency
- School Environment and Safety

In addition to completing missions by answering questions and spending earned tokens to vote on their values, players used a number of interactive game features:

- Enhanced commenting system: Players could “like” and reply directly to comments, allowing for interactive dialogues among participants.
- Stakeholder selection and visualization: Game participants were identified by roles within the community—teacher, student, parent, administrator, or other stakeholder.
- Mapping: Game participants were encouraged to think about the physical spaces that student learning takes place within and outside of, expanding these spaces outside the walls of the school. Participants pinpointed and mapped where students might interact and learn.

- Challenges: Users generated new questions and topics for discussion around accountability within BPS, allowing the conversation to expand outside the boundaries originally constructed by EGL.

In total, there were 451 people registered on CPI, with 440 participants playing all seven missions. Almost all of those registered were English speakers: 445 people played in English, while only five played in Spanish and zero played in Haitian Creole.⁵ Figure 2 provides additional details on the breakdown of CPI players.

Figure 2. Community PlanIt Player Statistics

Number of Players by Mission		Number of Players by Language		Totals	
Improving Attendance	97	English	445	Users in the System	451
A Better and Safer School Environment	47			Points	105,175
The Path to Graduation and Beyond	68			Number of Challenges	43
Creating Opportunities to Learn	35				
Engaging Families and the Community	42	Spanish	5		
Learning and Academic Growth	55	Haitian	0		
Closing Achievement Gaps	96				

Augmented Deliberation

Following five weeks of game play, the online portion of the BPS CPI pilot ended and organizers at EGL and BPS convened a Town Hall meeting for players to discuss and expand on the online deliberations while interacting face-to-face with fellow players. All CPI players were invited to attend the October 20 event at English High School, which began with food and continued with introductory comments and a welcome from CPI developers; presentation of awards (a Nook e-reader) to the top point earner from CPI; a small group breakout activity; and a question and answer period for the players to pose questions to the developers as well as to BPS administrators.

During the small group breakout, attendees rotated among tables for a role-playing activity. Mixed groups of seven to 12 attendees were given 20 minutes to deliberate on how a particular character would respond to a question in the BPS CPI online game. The small group deliberation was facilitated by a student player, and after talking through potential responses from common

⁵ These numbers were reported by the Emerson Gamelab. We expect that there was some overlap between playing the game in English and in Spanish, with one player playing in both languages.

community personas (e.g., doctor, teacher, single parent, high school student), the group entered an agreed-upon response into the online game. After 20 minutes, the small groups rotated and participants were given a new challenge with different characters.

Participating in this activity together gave players the opportunity to compare and contrast their thoughts, thus enabling them to get a sense of the breadth of perspectives brought to the issue at hand. Participants were asked to put themselves in the shoes of other people and to collaborate with fellow players to develop one response based on their thinking about how another person would respond.

Further, the Town Hall served to bolster participant confidence in BPS's commitment to community engagement and the administration's overall intention to innovate around engagement practices. Participants were given the opportunity to have face time with senior members of the administration. The Town Hall also opened up new lines of discussion—for example, the role of technology in schools—with views representing multiple perspectives.

Participant Feedback: Themes in Brief

The majority of participants interviewed described themselves as “active players,” meaning they played the game several times a week for the majority of the missions. When asked what active playing looked like, players described their own engagement in various ways:

- Frequent conversations via the comment boxes, in which they responded to others either through a direct response or by “liking” the comment
- Posing or responding to a challenge
- Earning points and spending their tokens on the Community Values

Successes

Engagement Anytime, Anywhere

Participants overwhelmingly enjoyed the mobility and ease of use that Community PlanIt offered to them. For frequent “town hall” attendees, the game was a welcome break from the often long, arduous, and overly formulaic community meetings typically hosted by the district. Participants often mentioned being able to play during a coffee break at work or right before putting their children to bed. In this way, the game succeeded in “meeting people where they are”—that is, meeting them at their desks, in their living rooms, or in even their cars (one respondent played while sitting in traffic). Many noted that a platform like CPI is especially useful for the populations that BPS is trying to target: working parents with little time on their hands. Participants were able to actively play a role in their child’s school at their own pace and within the bounds of their own schedule.

An Active and Sustained Dialogue

Participants found that being forced to write down their responses to the questions encouraged a thoughtfulness that would perhaps not exist in a face-to-face environment. Unlike with on-the-spot comments, participants were able to take time to think about and edit their written comments prior to submitting them. They were also able to compare their responses to others’, allowing them to review potential alternatives to their perspective and then, in turn, respond. Additionally, the record of community play was an invaluable tool for players, not only because they were able to learn about the opinions of others in the community but also because they were able to use these responses as a reference for responses that they made later in the game.

An Untraditional Method That Works

Participants found the use of a digital platform to be innovative and fun. Most noted that students are often left out of engagement processes, but that a digital platform is one seemingly effective way to bring them back into the fold. Others argued that traditional community meetings had become entrenched in their own proceedings, suggesting that

Community PlanIt could provide a fruitful opportunity to “do” engagement using new and creative methods.

Augmented Deliberation Pushes Players Toward Greater Understanding, Empathy, and Confidence

Overall, participants viewed Community PlanIt as a powerful shared experience. They noted that they were better able to create an environment of mutual respect both in the digital platform and in the face-to-face setting. Most believed that their interactions in the game helped them come to the town hall with a greater sense of group identification and an increased willingness to engage in a more in-depth dialogue with their fellow participants.

Concerns

Lack of Participant Representativeness

Participants voiced concerns about a lack of promotional materials and outreach activities. Most expressed that they wished there had been more done to reach out to traditionally marginalized communities, suggesting the game could have created a more rich and diverse record of engagement if it had done so. Others were concerned that a digital platform would not reach those without computers or cell phones, suggesting more could have been done to increase access to the platform through the use of public computer labs.

Concerns About Question Design and Framing

Participants cited frustration with the question framing and design within the game. Many noted that the questions were ridden with jargon or had an unclear purpose. Others noted a disparity between the questions in the game and the issues that they felt were the most relevant to the schools.

Low Confidence in Follow-up

Participants overwhelmingly expressed concern that the results of the game were not going to be used by BPS at all, leaving them with a sense of futility and frustration. Many noted that they found the game to be fun and interesting, but that they ultimately viewed it as something that mostly helped them to change or formulate their own opinions, as opposed to having any real influence over the decisions and actions of the BPS administration.

Participant Feedback: Themes in Detail

Successes

Engagement Anytime, Anywhere

Participants overwhelmingly enjoyed the convenience and ease of use inherent in Community PlanIt, suggesting that because the platform is able to meet people where they are it reaches populations that may otherwise not have participated in engagement initiatives.

The advantage of Community PlanIt—and this is why I’m loving it as far as a communication tool goes—[is] it’s accessible anytime. I can go on in the middle of the night.

In-person requires you to be at a certain place at a certain time, and if you have a lot of obligations, that could be a problem. I was doing [PlanIt] at one o’clock in the morning. I didn’t have to worry about my child. I didn’t have to worry about my work at home, with my job. I could do it whenever there was time available for me to do that to participate.

I got into it because it was about BPS and I’m interested in BPS and because I thought, Well, here’s a way that you can break down some of those barriers around parents or families who can’t participate in things because of time, because of two jobs, because of the scheduling of things, because of multiple kids going places and you just don’t have time to do your own thing.

Many also noted that because the game was not limited to a certain time frame, as is the case with many traditional town hall Town Hall–style engagement initiatives, players were able to spend time synthesizing their thoughts, ensuring that their written comments made sense and reasonably conveyed their point.

If there [is] a meeting and the question is “What do you think about X?” I might have such complex thoughts about it that I can’t formulate a response quickly enough, whereas with Community PlanIt, sometimes I’ve read a question and then came back to it later in the day or the next day with a more thoughtful answer than I would’ve had at that time.

It forced me to put in black-and-white some really satisfying answers...because you’re only playing for a short amount of time. To put in black-and-white your thesis on these matters and write it out. To get out of the emotion, and get out of that responding mode, and to think, Okay, what would it take?

In addition to making positive comments about the time efficiency of Community PlanIt, players found that the written nature of the game might have encouraged some community members who are not comfortable voicing their opinions in town hall settings to participate.

In a meeting, not everybody likes to get up in front of people and talk, so you're going to miss a lot of opportunities to get feedback from those people, whereas on the computer, it only says your first name and [the] first letter of your last name, so nobody's going to know who [you are]. People who are hesitant to put forth their opinions, if they're a little anonymous they might be more likely to do that.

A Lasting Public Record of Community Input

All participants interviewed noted the usefulness of Community PlanIt as a public record of active community input.

Often, if you have a conversation, you remember ten percent of what someone else said. You maybe remember the main point that you were making, but if you have everything written down and you can see the responses, you can kind of track it. You can think about it. It can be very helpful.

Moreover, some noted that the documented comments might serve as a testament to community opinion, allowing both school administrators and other community members to get a sense of what is being said around a particular issue.

When BPS went to talk [at] school board meetings last fall, people were saying, "You're closing our great, small K-5 school. Don't do this." [School administrators] stated, "Well, everybody's asking for K-8 schools." I remember saying, "I hear you saying that, but nobody asked me." It would be good if she used this tool to get a wider range of opinions, so that people knew what other people were saying.

An Active and Sustained Dialogue

Participants actively commented and replied to one another, creating a dialogue within each individual question, allowing others who may not have actively participated in the conversation to witness the dialogue happening in real time.

Sometimes someone would say something that I didn't think of and [I'd] wish I had made that statement in my comment, so [I'd] just press the Like button to reinforced that person's comment.

I had written an answer to a question and somebody posted a reply to the comment. He didn't like the way I phrased something. I had said something about evaluating teachers—something like, "As customers of teachers . . ." and he wrote, "I don't like your fee-for-service customer statement," and I wrote back, "I totally agree with you . . ." and clarified. I like [the game] because when you need clarification you can ask for it.

Interviewees noted that the game gave them a sense of an otherwise invisible support network of people who shared their experiences and opinions.

I felt pretty at home there, and some of the other players that I was playing with, I'm sure, are in different professions, and [have] different ethnicities, different backgrounds. I felt supportive from my answers and felt like I could support other people's answers and perspectives as well.

That's really what it comes down to. I think it's the ability to see—to get out and to get engaged in how far away or how close you are to other people in your community.

Many stated that participation in the game helped them better understand the opinions of others and empathize with their points of view.

It's given me some good perspective in terms of the administrative point of view. It's a really positive thing for me to see from other people's perspectives and respond to that.

Despite an overall enjoyment of the gamelike features, most participants cited their engagement with the issue, rather than a feeling of competition, as their main motivation for continued playing. Further, some expressed concern that the gamelike quality of the platform, if elaborated upon, might actually detract from the level of engagement possible within CPI.

Perhaps my dedication to social justice is what really brought me back to the game. It wasn't because it was a game. It was because the things that were being discussed are things that I prioritize.

I think it would be hard to design a game that's purely entertaining and then also tries to engage people in a thoughtful way outside of the game.

I think it's [a] social media thing, partly. It's like, as I answer these questions, then I get to see what other people have answered and I get to reflect on what I did.

The game motivated me to say, "You know, I have a say too. I work here, and I see these students, and I see what's happening."

An Untraditional Method That Works

For many respondents, CPI represented a departure from the typical engagement processes of the past, and its innovation sparked a new interest and optimism for how the city encourages and facilitates public participation.

[Traditional town hall meetings] tend to be a kind of pro forma thing that doesn't lead to much change or much difference, in general. I believe that we were genuinely finding new ways to interact with the community. That's unusual for BPS; it may be a sign of a new direction and a new commitment to reengaging the community.

I liked the fact that it brought people together to talk about various issues and to explore different people's opinions about them. We had a chance to explore these issues over a period of time prior to actually meeting. I felt that was a great thing because people were much more aligned with what the issues were in doing that and were much more tolerant of each other's opinions and ideas.

It was a chance to voice an opinion that you wouldn't necessarily have a chance to [voice] in a formal format.

Many noted the efficacy of a digital tool in meeting younger populations where they are, in digital communities and social networks.

I feel like BPS needs to think about using things like this because I think students and younger populations are thinking about technology more.

Administrators as well as players repeatedly referred to the game's ability to capture the attention of youth who are already on their smartphones and computers.

I think it gave some young people a way to participate in a process where they could set the terms; it was something more comfortable to them. I think a larger portion of young people are comfortable with web-based social networks [than] those of us in an older generation.

Augmented Deliberation Pushes Players Toward Greater Understanding, Empathy, and Confidence

Participants came to the town hall with a shared understanding and investment in CPI and the issues discussed on the platform.

A lot of time I think I'm going to go to these things, and then at the end of the evening after work I'm just like, I can't; I don't even want to go. I don't feel like that. I felt like it was good. I was glad I talked to [BPS administrator].

Most events that I've been to are like you don't have a chance to be heard; you don't have a dialogue. You have someone telling you, "Here's what we're doing." It's totally no comparison. You had iPads at each of the desks. You had role play in there. You [summed up] at the end. It was really interactive and that's not typical for what I've experienced.

People had a much more complete perspective on the different issues. They were more tolerant of each other's ideas. They had a better understanding of how they fit, and they were able to be more insightful in their comments and discussions that we had in the town meeting. I thought that was very clear.

Because we had already had online conversations and some of them were in-depth and very thoughtful, we were all able to talk more deeply about the issues and questions.

Participants noted the town hall felt much different than traditional community meetings, commenting it was much more process oriented and much less procedural in nature.

This meeting was much more like a community planning meeting that some architects or city planners might do, where they would open up a discussion about a particular issue and have people talk about what the different elements were and maybe they would try to capture some of that information and then report it back later. This was much more process focused and less obligatory.

Participants found the role-play activity to be engaging and helpful, suggesting that the in-person event provided participants with a greater capacity for empathizing with the viewpoints of other community members and the BPS administration.

Here's my background when I'm role playing versus here's who I am as a parent, and here's how I can see these changes could impact this—both coming from my perspective as a parent versus from the role play coming from someone else's perspective, so it was a totally different angle for me.

It opened my mind to some things that at first I was like, "No, never ever." Then I'm like, "Oh, well, maybe," after seeing when people made a statement about why they felt the way they did. It opened my mind to other ideas.

The presence of BPS administration bolstered a general sense that BPS sees Community PlanIt as a way to truly engage communities.

You were able to ask a question and communicate back and forth. It's one thing for a person to be on a podium and telling you something, but these people were actually scattered throughout the space, so you're sitting here on one side listening to one person and on the other side is [another] BPS person, so they weren't sitting on a panel on the stage away from people. They were in with people answering questions. I liked that a lot.

Participants expressed a sense that the BPS administration was listening and found their comments to be helpful.

I hope it was helpful to them to hear what people were thinking and saying. A couple of the administrators there were open to that. I think they felt that it was really helpful, the kind of discussion that was taking place.

Concerns

Lack of Representativeness

Most interviewed praised Community PlanIt's involvement with English High School and its active engagement with its students.

I'm impressed with some of the responses of the students. I think there's a lot of high-school-aged students responding.

Some of the comments that students have made have been frighteningly honest.

In spite of a general sense that the game opened up conversations among people who would not normally have the opportunity to speak, participants still suggested that community members who are traditionally the most marginalized probably did not participate in the game.

Not everybody has a personal computer in their home that happens to be wireless. The people who were responding had higher education, were probably not single parents, and didn't have three jobs to try to pay their bills. My guess is that they were of higher, somewhat better socioeconomic status, like white and [living] in particular zones of the city.

I don't think it was promoted well at all. There are a lot of programs in the city where they're really reaching out to the demographic that utilizes the

Boston public schools. I think they should have done more to get those folks to participate in the program.

There is definitely a technological gap. I also think [there's a gap] when you ask people to respond in writing. I work in a school [that] has a lot of new immigrant parents. [Unfortunately,] they don't have the basic [language] skills to respond to that kind of prompt. They're not playing, yet they make up a substantial part of the population of our school. Those questions on there, I'm sure they have a response or two but just can't access it.

I'm hoping that they do incorporate that into something that they do once every quarter or whenever it is, but just definitely making people aware of it. The one thing that was brought up at the meeting that I thought was very true was [that] it wasn't promoted in the places it could have been promoted.

Concerns About Question Design and Framing

Question design was hit-or-miss, with some players stating that the questions were very relatable, while others stated that they were overly technical and bureaucratic. Many felt the questions limited the conversation to a certain set of topics that were not easily understood by the average user.

There was one [question that] gave you four schools: This is the CTI. This is this metric or score system . . . a lot of stuff that even some average teachers have no idea what it is. It was something that I was able to answer fluidly, but I'm like, "Yeah, but if you had asked me this question five years ago, I wouldn't have been able to do this," and at that point, I had been teaching for 12 years.

Some of the content has frustrated me. Some of the questions and some of the ways they want questions answered frustrate me because I feel like that answer isn't going to get you any information. Like, you're asking a question that either everyone can interpret [it] differently or the answer doesn't mean anything. Like there was a recent one where they asked, If the superintendent has \$1,000 she's got to cut, which of these categories should she cut from? And you get that school template, and I'm like, "That's not how you cut. That doesn't mean anything."

Others praised the questions for their ability to cut to the core of school reform in Boston.

I felt really connected to the type of information and the types of dilemma that were being presented, I'm wondering if those are the same issues that the parents of my students are thinking about, and I'm not sure they are.

I actually think that the tasks were pretty smartly created, so I enjoy the types of tasks that you're asked to do. I think it reflects the better part of Boston culture and responds to what I know we need to look at in terms of reform and education.

Belief that BPS is a Barrier to Increased Self- and Community Efficacy

From the beginning of their involvement in CPI, the majority of respondents expressed low satisfaction with BPS's past efforts to truly engage the Boston community on a variety of topics and in different settings:

I usually feel that Boston Public Schools is not responsive to the city, what the city is saying in terms of rebalancing zones and school choice. It's sort of like if you don't measure it, you don't work on it, so [BPS is] not looking for more challenging and exciting opportunities to interact with other people, other organizations, other resources. If they're not looking for these kinds of opportunities, then they're not looking at the school as a learning community.

I'm sure I've answered multiple choice things about BPS before, but I didn't have the chance to really comment on it and in any way [I] wanted to.

I went [to a committee meeting] really passionate and wanting to voice an opinion. And basically everyone spoke really passionately, and the school committee didn't even adjourn to a back room or anything before they made their decisions. I felt like the decision had already been made and they don't really care at all; it wasn't going to be revisited.

Overall, participants had serious doubts about BPS's commitment to truly engaging otherwise marginalized stakeholders.

There's always going to be a few champions, but the bottom line is that [is only collaborative if there is a coalition of people who [are] invested in change.

I really question the district's overall feeling about this program. I still feel like it was this: The funding was there, and so they did it. I was just disappointed. I went to the BPS website and there was no news about the town hall on the main calendar. So I sort of felt like my suspicions were confirmed, like, "Yeah, they don't really care about this."

There was some optimism expressed about the efficacy of participation in this new engagement effort by BPS:

I felt like a lot of concerns were brought up and I felt like my engagement was actually with a purpose and someone on the other end was actually listening. It wasn't just me putting [in] my complaints; it was more like improving something.

However, despite commendations of CPI's innovation, many respondents shared a continued lack of trust in BPS's ability and commitment to engage the public meaningfully. Trust in BPS's engagement efforts seems to hinge most directly on the extent to which the information collected in CPI would be used by district-level decision makers.

I think it's only useful as people use it. So if the district isn't going to use the information or isn't going to use it to move forward with any programs, it's not useful at all.

The limitations [on] how the information is used. The information is there and if people choose to use it for whatever [whenever] they want, it's there. The only limitation is once they have the information, how are they going to work with it? PlanIt itself doesn't have the limitations. It's once you've had the feedback then what do you do with it? That becomes a limitation.

I do believe that the report will happen, but I also know that hundreds of reports and information [were] generated as well. Sometimes when they come back into large organizations, it takes Mohammed to move the mountain, and sometimes, the mountain doesn't move.

Conclusions

Community PlanIt represents a marked shift in best practice around digital engagement insofar as it enables Boston Public Schools to reach beyond the forum of the Town Hall to engage stakeholders on important and controversial issues that currently characterize the state of K–12 education in America’s urban centers.

For those who chose to participate in a committed and candid way, CPI facilitated a process of ongoing and deep engagement in which participants were asked to respond and document their opinions about the topics central to the future of how schools within the district are seen. This process proved to be quite effective in instilling a sense of community empowerment: Members were able to voice their experience of BPS through a documented dialogue that was constructed and sponsored by BPS itself. Decision makers could also upload and display important documents on the system, allowing community members to directly interface with materials.

By meeting people where they were, through their personal computers and smartphones, CPI was able to sustain a long-term engagement initiative that asked stakeholders to continually engage with important and complex questions regarding the notion of school accountability and the ways in which school performance can or should be measured. In this way, stakeholders were able to produce a living testament to their own particular knowledge while simultaneously expanding their knowledge base through interaction with others across the city. Within each mission, the game participants:

- Learned about the nature of the performance indices and how they would be used.
- Problem-solved and dialogued with other residents to discuss the implementation of the indices and the effectiveness of their content.
- Sent feedback and local knowledge directly to decision makers, receiving sometimes immediate responses from BPS administrators.
- Strengthened community bonds and built community capacity, which was manifested at the culminating town hall meeting.

Yet innovations like CPI cannot stand by themselves. Initiatives that intend to expand the breadth and depth of traditional engagement methods used in BPS need the continued institutional support of the district and its preexisting networks and infrastructure. Further, players need assurance that their comments and participation in the game will be used in a meaningful way to inform and impact decisions. We see these as potential hurdles, as there will likely be a number of limitations on the future application of CPI due to concerns on the part of the BPS administration. These concerns seem to largely stem from a general wariness and caution around making drastic changes to engagement practices that the city has been using for several years.

- *Protection of traditional methods:* There was some concern that the digital platform would interfere with traditional community engagement initiatives. The source of this issue was most likely a budgetary concern—one major fear being that funding would be taken from community meetings and put into the creation of a more institutionalized digital platform not subsidized through outside funding sources.
- *Viability for BPS:* There was concern that Community PlanIt was not an appropriate way to gather information from the community due to the highly complex nature of the issues that BPS consistently faces. Although some participants might spend the time to write in-depth responses, others might simply try to move through the questions as quickly as possible. This would create a disparity in the kinds of answers, which would have to be sifted through and organized to be of use.
- *Lack of capacity:* There was concern that while Community PlanIt is a great method for collecting a large amount of raw data, there is little capacity within BPS to analyze this data and make it meaningful or useful to the district.

Recommendations

All of our interviews with participants suggest that the pilot run of Community PlanIt was positive, leading us to believe that Community PlanIt has much to offer BPS as it embarks on a series of controversial school reforms. As the debate around the future of public schools in the city of Boston comes to a head, it is more important than ever for BPS to innovate around its community engagement practices. BPS does to some extent see Community PlanIt as one mechanism through which to experiment and test new engagement methods. There is a fair degree of hesitancy around the prospect of change, but there are also champions of these kinds of tools within the administration who are imbuing initiatives like Community PlanIt with a consistently renewed sense of motivation. If implemented for a second time, there are several key issues on which BPS could improve.

The following recommendations are based on what we heard from interviews and during our observations.

1. *Create spaces for the conversation to continue*

Many participants felt they had an insufficient amount of time to answer all the questions or read through other players' comments in order to create a response.

There were just too many questions to answer in one sitting. It would take me 45 minutes to an hour just to do five or six questions.

A lot of the time I wanted to try and get through the missions. I didn't have time to look at all the other comments.

Creating a space for discussion that is documented and can be consistently referenced is one of the most important aspects of Community PlanIt. Although it may prove difficult for game administrators to routinely mine the inflow of comments and responses, leaving this or another forum open as both a resource and a tool for sharing may provide interested community members a platform for continuous input.

2. *Develop a more intuitive and user-friendly set of questions*

Many participants expressed that the way the questions were framed served to limit their responses. For example, some noted that the questions seemed to leave out larger issues about the holistic experiences of students (i.e., questions did not address issues of mental health or socioeconomic background) and instead focused on more esoteric and administrative questions, such as the usefulness of one particular test score or another district-specific performance measure. One parent noted that these kinds of questions would be more relevant "if our kids were healthy and appropriately functioning," but because this is often not the case, broader questions about the experiences of all students need to be asked. Similarly, many noted that the questions did not seem to match up to their experience

of their child's education. Often, the language was hard to understand or too ridden with jargon for the questions to be relatable. Most poignantly, teachers interviewed noted that questions specific to test scores as performance measures were likely difficult to comprehend for the majority of community stakeholders. CPI's second implementation should include a less esoteric and broader set of questions that serve to open the conversation to a diverse set of concerns as opposed to narrowing the debate to the specific issues the BPS administration is already attuned to.

3. *Engage in more diverse recruitment practices to cast a wider net*

The majority of the participants expressed disappointment that more was not done to reach out to a greater number of communities. On the one hand, this concern was expected given that the first implementation of Community PlanIt was a pilot and lacked the infrastructure necessary to extend to a diverse range of individuals. On the other hand, time and money were invested in translating the game into Spanish and Haitian Creole with little to no return. As stated previously, out of the 451 registered participants only five played in Spanish, while not a single person played in Haitian Creole. For the second implementation, we recommend that BPS work with groups that already exist in the city so that recruitment can be channeled through preexisting networks. For example, one participant noted that many community groups exist within the city that work to bring technology into the home. This seems like a natural partnership for BPS's engagement team and would likely prove fruitful with regard to increasing enrollment numbers. Additionally, the BPS administration needs to work to build buy-in among its own membership. Constructing networks of teachers, principals, active parents, and students who all share an interest in participating in innovative methods around community engagement is an important step in building greater numbers of participants. take.

4. *Host additional in-person events*

Participants who attended the town hall overwhelmingly found it to be worthwhile and informative. Hosting similar events more often and in different locations throughout the city would contribute to a larger sense of group identity among the players. Participants were able to sit down next to their neighbors, their children's teachers, and their school administrators to discuss the issues that they had already been engaging with over the course of the seven missions. Importantly, the presence of BPS administrators at the town hall put a face to a school administration that is sometimes seen as a bureaucratic maze.

5. *Instill more confidence that results will be used*

As stated previously, participants lack faith in BPS's engagement efforts due to a long history of what is seen as pro forma engagement. Community PlanIt should be communicated as a turning point in how BPS sees engagement. BPS should put its weight behind the initiative and use its preexisting communications structure to let players know how the game is being used and in what capacity. To a degree, BPS is already very open to integrating the game into its engagement functions and hopes to use the data from the pilot to inform future initiatives. As one BPS administrator stated in an interview:

The coin spending, how we're going to weigh this index, what measures we use, other sorts of technical details of the system, our communication tools, how we talk about all these concepts and measures, and then it's also informed how we're going to continue to engage and what areas we need to continue to educate and think about and then get more feedback on from different groups.

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Appendix A

Community Engagement at BPS: A Brief History

To set the stage for our analysis, we began by looking at the recent history of engagement practices within the Boston school district. The story of school reform in Boston is ridden with controversy around decisions made within its limits. Veteran teachers, administrators, and longtime community members still live with the memory of the mass protest and unrest around racial segregation and busing that plagued 1970s Boston. Recent decision-making has been no different in the sense that similar issues around race and class are still central to the debate about how Boston's schools should be run. Below is a brief recent history of community engagement processes within the district.

A Time Line

2004	With the support of the mayor, superintendent, and school committee, the Student Assignment Task Force solicits public opinion on changing in district zoning. The group proposes the creation of six elementary school zones across the city. The stated intention was that buses would need to drive fewer miles, which would save both time and money.
2008	Despite some action taken to address school zoning, the issue is largely ignored until Mayor Menino makes his 2008 State of the City address, during which he states, "I believe that we can rethink our school-assignment zones and continue providing children in every neighborhood with access to high-performing schools [while saving] up to \$10 million of transportation costs." Superintendent Carol Johnson introduces a five-year plan for BPS called the "Acceleration Agenda: 2009–2014," which includes goals around school rezoning and transformation. ⁶

⁶ See <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/bps/AccelerationAgenda.pdf> for the full agenda report.

2009	<p>Superintendent Carol Johnson proposes a rezoning plan, which includes five zones for elementary and middle schools.</p> <p>The Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School, Boston Bar Association, and ACLU of Massachusetts submit a recommendation to Superintendent Johnson that the controversial district rezoning plan be postponed and the community be engaged in order to supplement the creation of a new plan.⁷ This comes after mass protest and claims that the original plan would serve to re-segregate the city's schools.⁸</p>
Winter 2010	<p>BPS receives funding for the Technical Assistance for Student Assignment Plans project (TASAP) from the Department of Education for a community engagement initiative around rezoning. The grant enables Boston to “embark upon a multifaceted community-driven planning process to engage a wide range of stakeholders in redesigning its student assignment policies.”⁹</p>
Spring 2010	<p>The Golden Opportunity Summit hosted by the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, brings educators, advocates, and community members together to discuss reforms and rezoning. The summit releases a report that year.</p>
Spring–Summer 2010	<p>Community meetings and forums around school rezoning and acceleration agenda take place. The findings from the summit report inform the development and structure of the meetings.</p> <p>In June, BPS holds Neighborhood Day of Dialogue with meetings at 17 locations across the city to hear feedback from parents and students. In August, BPS hosts a meeting of community stakeholders.¹⁰ BPS also posts a survey on its website in English and Spanish asking the same questions presented at the Day of Dialogue, receiving more than 400 responses.</p>

⁷ See http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/news/rezoning_proposal_20090602.pdf for the proposal.

⁸ See http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2009/05/12/coalition_opposes_rezoning_of_schools/ for more details.

⁹ See <http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/News/Item.aspx?id=100088> for furthermore information.

¹⁰ See http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/Dayofdialogue_web.pdf for the full report.

Fall 2010	<p>Summary recommendation reports are released. The reports detail the outcomes of the community meetings, which inform the revision of a new plan titled Redesign and Reinvest.¹¹</p> <p>This plan includes proposals not just around school zoning and transportation but also involving a whole host of other issues facing BPS. Perhaps the most controversial are proposals around school closings and mergers. The Student Opportunity Index (SOI) and Student Performance Index (SPI) are created as a means of assessing school performance in the accountability framework proposed as a part of the new initiative.¹²</p>
Fall–Winter 2010	Community meetings take place with the intention of allowing community members to discuss the revised plan, including conversations around the SOI and SPI.
Spring 2011	Committee meetings are held to discuss reform and specifics of school closings and mergers. A plan is introduced for an 18- month engagement process. (See Appendix A, an excerpt from the district’s April 2011 presentation to the Boston School Committee, for details.)
Summer–Fall 2011	Community PlanIt is implemented as a supplemental community engagement tool to traditional community meetings.

¹¹ See <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/redesign> for more information.

¹² See minutes from a School Committee school committee meeting in May 2011: http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/sc-meetings/sc_minutes_5-11-11.pdf. See also an overview of the accountability framework: <http://www.slideshare.net/ERSslides/frank-barnes-chief-accountability-officer-boston-public-schools-presentation>.