GOLD MEDALLION AWARD ENTRY 2022

RENEW & INVEST

HOWARD-SUAMICO SCHOOL DISTRICT | 2021 REFERENDUM

Submitted by:
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Title of Entry: HSSD Renew and Invest Campaign 2021
Category: Bond/Finance Campaign
(Please also consider this entry for the Golden Achievement Award)

Number of Communications Staff: 2.5

HSSD is a public school district in suburban Green Bay, Wis. with one high school (9-12), one middle school (7-8), one intermediate school (5-6), and five elementary schools (K-4).

Enrollment in grades K-12 is 5,871.

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Like many districts, HSSD faces the challenge of aging buildings. Even in 2020, half of the eight district schools did not have air conditioning, an increasing concern for student safety and success. Additionally, the district was approaching the renewal of an expiring five-year operational funding override which supported lower class sizes across all K-12 grades in the form of 30 classroom teaching positions and compensation enhancements for all teachers and support staff. In the fall of 2020 the context for these important needs was a global health crisis, its resultant economic upheaval, and roiling political uncertainty. Undaunted, HSSD engaged its community to come to consensus on its needs, define a process, and offer a solution to voters. The district delivered on its promise: all while reducing the property tax levy rate to its lowest level in more than a decade. The $123M Renew and Invest Referendum campaign was an improbable success executed during unprecedented times.

The two goals of the campaign were to rebuild trust during the community’s politically-charged response to the district’s pandemic safety plan and to win support for the two referendum questions.

Requiring a simple majority, the five-year renewal of the $5M annual operational funding override passed with 52.1% of the vote. The $98M facilities question passed with 53.9% support.
OVERVIEW, CONTINUED

HSSD utilized staff and community surveys to inform campaign communications. In addition, a community task force comprised of 40 volunteers met in a fully-virtual environment during the fall of 2020 due to the pandemic. The group assessed needs, studied school finance and long-range facilities planning, and ultimately endorsed a 2021 referendum campaign. The communications plan was developed and executed by the HSSD School and Community Relations staff with support from a consultant for task force coordination and graphic design.

HSSD engaged Donovan Group as a partner in planning and executing the 2021 campaign following a successful collaboration on the 2018 operational funding referendum. Research included two community surveys in October 2020 and December 2020. Findings from the survey data informed task force deliberations and resulted in a shift in messaging, tax levy rate impact, tactical communications, and most importantly, the Board’s formation of the referendum questions. Further, the work of the task force informed strategic finance decisions, ballot language, and the campaign communications plan.

In a post-referendum survey, 75.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The district is headed in the right direction,” and 75.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The school board is doing what it takes to make the district successful.”

Target Audience(s): Staff, Residents, Media
Total Budget: $25,000: $10,000 task force consultant, graphic design; $8,000 printing, postage; $6,000 video production; $1,000 advertising, signage

Please visit the linked Google Drive folder for examples and details. Links to specific project elements are included in the campaign summary to follow.

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Two months later, lives were unimaginably disrupted worldwide by COVID-19, so facilities and finance planning were supplanted by health and safety response efforts throughout the summer of 2020. Nevertheless, the facilities needs persisted, and the funding renewal date crept closer. Despite the increasing challenges of the pandemic, notably including an increasingly frustrated and critical segment of the community, the district and Board decided to commission a community task force to study the facilities needs and finance opportunities, and to recommend a course of action to the Board, including the possibility of pausing the work on long-range needs, given the environment at the time.

To support the work of the task force, a community-wide survey was deployed in September 2020 with 1,595 completed responses, a record-high response rate for a district-sponsored referendum survey. The survey compared overall responses with those of a disaggregated group of non-parent, non-staff residents, historically a bookend level of support as a reference point. Highlighted findings from this survey featured 71% of respondents favoring renewal of the operational funding, including 47% of the comparison group. Respondents favorably supported a solution that addressed facilities needs without raising the tax rate by an overwhelming 82%, including a strong majority 65% of the comparison group.
RESEARCH, CONTINUED

Armed with this data, the task force proceeded in its work, ultimately identifying a second survey as a critical tool in further refining its recommendation to the Board.

The final community-wide survey was sent in December 2020 with a strong 1,486 response rate and an increase in the number of responses from the crucial comparison group. The survey sought to define terms and gauge support (i.e. Capital Needs, Learning Environment Needs, etc.) as well as provide brackets of acceptable property tax impact within which to build a complex multi-facility plan. Four solutions ranging from $53M to $135M were tested, with varying levels of support indicated for each. Ultimately, the community task force adapted its planning in response to the survey and crafted a $98M recommendation to the Board. The Board, in turn, lowered the tax levy rate by $0.20 per $1,000 of property value to $8.99. This decision led to the lowest tax levy rate in more than a decade.

A late-campaign research project that informed development of an impactful talking point and associated graphic unearthed a noteworthy fact about the HSSD referendum plan. There were 32 Wisconsin school districts on the ballot in April 2021 with a facilities referendum question, seeking to borrow funds to support investment. Of those 32, nine planned for a stable tax levy rate and only one, the Howard-Suamico School District, could deliver a levy rate decrease to voters along with the facilities plan.
ANALYSIS/PLANNING

Communications planning was developed with task force engagement support from Donovan Group, a nationwide school communications firm specializing in referendum campaigns. The key strategic elements of the communications plan were aligned to the work of the task force, with each of the plan elements identified with one or more of the five key task force recommendations to the Board of Education.

Plan goals included:

1. Provide consistent, timely, and accurate updates on the April 2021 referendum;
2. Ensure transparency regarding planned expenditures of referendum funds; and
3. Create communication opportunities that engage and invest HSSD stakeholders.

Measurable objectives included:

1. To build trust in District Leadership
   a. Hosted three public engagement sessions to share information and collect input from key stakeholders. More than 100 staff and residents attended in total;
   b. Facilitated print and broadcast media coverage to engage audience through trusted, impartial messengers;
   c. Created staff engagement opportunities including staff meetings, email, webcasts, newsletters, and special info sessions;
   d. Utilized SchoolMessenger system, digital newsletters, and spring parent–teacher conferences to communicate directly with families; and
   e. Conducted two stakeholder surveys.

2. To win support for the April 2021 referendum
   a. Launch multi-faceted initiative to communicate about the April 2021 referendum;
   b. Provide an accessible online resource for updates, reports, and to serve as an archive;
   c. Publish newsletter cover stories featuring referendum planning updates, mailed to all residents;
   d. Mail three additional informational brochures to all residents;
   e. Utilize social media platforms to communicate referendum facts and updates;
   f. Developed a six-video series to support public information needs and to build trust in transparency of financial impact of referendum plan;
   g. Design and construct signs with key infographics for use in schools and at Board of Ed linkage meetings; and
   h. Analyze voter registration database.
With Board endorsement in January 2021, a seemingly too-good-to-be-true financial proposal of $98M in facilities updates and renewal of critical operational funding in exchange for a decreasing property tax levy would proceed onto the ballot. The communication and engagement opportunity was underway.

The complete plan, including task force recommendations, target audiences, key messages, details regarding measurable objectives, and a communications calendar is available to view here. A postcard update was mailed after ballot language was approved.
COMMUNICATION/IMPLEMENTATION

The components of the plan are included in the links below with descriptions.

- **Task Force** - The task force was comprised of 40 community volunteers, met five times in the fall of 2021 to study school finance, and ultimately submitted a report of recommendations to the Board of Education and the public. *Agendas for each of the five meetings and the complete task force report are available here.*

- **Banners and Graphics** - Posters and banners used for community info sessions were created by HSSD as well as a third-party graphic designer via Donovan Group and printed by HSSD. A related design was used for social media. *The graphics can be viewed here.*

- **Publications** - We provided a long form mailer in January 2021 and two follow-up postcards. The postcard content was informed by the Q&A portion of the community info sessions. *All print mailers and publications can be viewed here.*

- **Website** - The referendum website has been archived and can be viewed here.

- **Staff and Board of Education Presentations** - A staff webinar and a series of planning reports to the Board of Education were submitted throughout the campaign. *Those presentation slide decks can be viewed here.*

- **Media Coverage** - Earned media coverage exceeded expectations, given the district is suburban to a large metro district in the Green Bay media market (*view a summary here*). Highlights included: a front page newspaper feature, “*The Dollars and Sense behind Howard-Suamico’s Referendum Questions,*” in *The Press Times* and a high school student newspaper story seeking to inform voting-age seniors and district staff, “*Vote April 6: Right Time, Right Now for Referendum.*”

- **Videos** - A six-video series was produced in support of the campaign, *including four videos produced entirely in-house and two videos produced with a local partner* for a white-board tax rate explainer approach. A thank you video was shared with the community days after the successful result.

- **Social Media** - The social media campaign in support of the referendum featured a “Did You Know...” theme. The series of nine *social media graphics can be viewed here*. Total reach of the social media campaign was: 36,656 on Facebook, 65,116 on Twitter, and 6,156 on Instagram. In total, referendum-related social media posts represented 45% of all engagement on HSSD social media channels during the campaign with an audience reach of more than 100,000.

- **Post-Referendum Communications** - Staff, parent, and community communication pieces after the successful referendum result included banners, email updates, newsletter articles, and website resources. *Examples are viewable here.*
Requiring a simple majority, the five-year renewal of the $5M annual operational funding override passed with 52.1% of the vote. The $98M facilities question passed with 53.9% support. The project met the goal of renewing funding and providing relief from the state-imposed revenue cap and saved the district from further staffing and programming cuts. The result helped address learning environment inequity with air conditioning installation approved for the remaining half of HSSD schools that had been without. It also addressed the two primary building upgrade needs at Bay View Middle School and Forest Glen Elementary School.

The project exceeded goals in terms of lowering the property tax levy rate despite $98M in facilities investment in alignment with the task force recommendation to consider lowering the rate. This critical strategic finance element of the campaign proved to be a difference-maker in a political environment that was otherwise troublesome for many Wisconsin referendums. Whereas fall 2020 referendums in Wisconsin passed at an 84% rate and 90% of spring 2020 referendums in Wisconsin passed, only 60% of spring 2021 referendums achieved a passing margin.

Click here to access supporting documentation for the campaign, including specific elements linked in responses above and other items.
Key takeaways from the campaign include:

- Continued partnership with public school referendum specialist, Donovan Group, to develop campaign strategy and execute task force;

- Successful implementation of task force community engagement model, which also supported future recruitment efforts for the Howard-Suamico Education Foundation and Board of Education. Use of this model was a key finding from our successful 2018 referendum campaign;

- Task force operating entirely in a virtual environment was complex, high-stakes operation that was executed with nearly zero technical or operational glitches. Truly a positive turning point early in the campaign;

- Reduction of in-person info events from six (in 2018 campaign) to three was well-received based on attendance and anecdotal feedback;

- Cost savings of printing mailers banners in-house, in addition to a majority of video series production. Total campaign budget was $25,000; printing vendor and video production vendor costs could have tripled the budget;

- Digital newsletter for families and staff, The Referendum Roundup, was created late in the campaign in response to community info session feedback. The five editions can be viewed on our website archive page here.

- Timely use of surveys provided quantitative support for data-based decision-making; and

- Support from the Policy Governance model of the HSSD Board of Education allowed administration to be agile and responsive to community resident concerns during the campaign.
EVALUATION, CONTINUED

Post-campaign next steps include:

- Launch of Leadership HSSD - a community engagement and education cohort to support leadership development, to continue education regarding complex school funding issues, and to spark productive conversations regarding support for local public schools;

- Development of a new family and community digital newsletter, The Compass, to support referendum updates; and

- In partnership with the architect and construction management firms, creation of new referendum website and communications plan to support ongoing facilities updates for staff, families, and community. The full site officially debuts May 2022 to coincide with groundbreaking events.
Contact

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