Research: The Shawnee Mission School District (SMSD) Research and Development Forum (R&D Forum) is one of the district’s largest celebrations of student innovation and excellence. A 59-year tradition, the event includes a public open house featuring student projects and performances and a juried competition. Due to the pandemic, the event needed to change. The communications team met with members of the curriculum department to determine a new plan to promote the event, encourage student involvement, and provide an opportunity for community members to engage. One goal was to prompt student participation in this event so they could benefit from the educational opportunity. Another goal is to encourage viewership. Another informal goal is to raise awareness and generate positive reactions in our community.

Planning: Curriculum leaders developed a plan for holding a hybrid R&D Forum. This included two segments: 1) An in-person and digital pitch competition for student entrepreneurs, hosted in partnership with a local entrepreneurial startup company. The event would be livestreamed by the communications team for those who could not attend. The communication team was to promote the event. 2) A digital showcase of student projects and presentations, produced by the communications team. Collaborators built a communications plan to: 1) Prompt participation among students in the pitch competition. 2) Encourage student submissions to the digital showcase. 3) Publish and distribute the pitch competition and digital presentation to be viewed by students, staff, family members, and members of the community. Both departments wanted to engage students from all attendance feeder patterns and from elementary, middle, and high school. Viewers could watch live and on-demand. The competition included a live voting component, another gauge for viewership.

Implementation: The communication team used direct emails to families and staff to engage participation, hosted an informational webpage, shared posts on the district website and social media platforms, published a column in a hyperlocal newspaper, and distributed content for principals to share with school communities. Curriculum leaders attended faculty and PTA meetings to encourage participation. Each touchpoint included details about applying for both events and links to submission forms. The communication team produced a live streamed, multi-camera broadcast of the competition finals and awards ceremony. All submissions for the digital showcase were placed in a film posted to the district website and social media platforms. To encourage viewership, multiple direct emails were distributed, posts were shared on the district website and social media accounts, and a column in a local online newspaper was published. A promotional article was also shared in the district’s magazine mailed to 100,000 residents to encourage viewership. Links for live voting were shared on an informational website, district website, and on social media.

Evaluation: Student participation in the competition and digital showcase exceeded goals. 84 students entered the first round of the pitch finals competition. 734 projects and presentations were submitted for the student showcase. The department achieved the goal of having elementary, middle, and high school students from all district attendance areas represented.
- The curriculum department expected about 200 votes for the People’s Choice Award. More than 700 individuals voted, surpassing their goal.
- The digital showcase and livestream pitch competition drew more than 900 viewers each. Subsequent edits of the production have also garnered views on various platforms.
- Anecdotally, the curriculum department thanked the communication department for the event support. By using communications tactics, the event helped support their academic goals, especially opportunities for students to share their academic work with an authentic audience beyond the classroom. Furthermore, a supporting benefactor who has endowed the forum commended and asked us to continue the new format. Multiple community members expressed compliments and words of thanks for the event, including the partnering business, administrators, Board members, competition judges, educators, and family members. Plans are in the works to incorporate this format into the 2022 R&D Forum. A year later, winners started businesses and built prototypes with prize money.
The R&D Forum Can Be Viewed Here: [https://youtu.be/mvdYBAoyD5U](https://youtu.be/mvdYBAoyD5U)

Time Stamps:

Next Great Idea Pitch Competition:
Start through 1:37:46: Pitch Competition
1:37:46: R&D Forum Student Showcase
4:00:36 R&D Forum Award Ceremony

Promotional Materials

[Inside Magazine Article](https://insidemagazinearticle.com) – Delivered to 100,000 residents

[Article in Shawnee Mission Post](https://articles.shawneemissionpost.com)

Social Media Promotion Sample:

[Facebook](https://facebook.com)
[Twitter](https://twitter.com)

Post-Event Highlights and Coverage

[District Story](https://districtstory.com)

[Startland Post-Event Feature](https://startlandfeature.com)

[Startland Student Spotlight](https://startlandspotlight.com)