Research: Anoka-Hennepin Schools would seek voter approval in the special election in the fall of 2021 to renew two school district levies and propose the continuation of support put in place to address mental health and social-emotional support for students upon expiration of federal emergency funding in response to the pandemic. An initial community survey conducted in May 2021 indicated that likely voters would approve the two levy renewals by 77 and 82 percent based on voter’s current perception of the school district. The survey indicated that the new levy could pass by an estimated 60 percent of voters.

The first question asked the community to renew a $34.5 million operating levy which provides stability by maintaining current school district programs, services and class size. This funding would represent 9.3% of all general fund revenue. The second question asked the community to renew a $4.5 million capital projects levy which provides technology support, tools and resources in Anoka-Hennepin classrooms for all students. If both questions were to be approved, community members would see no tax increase.

A third question on the ballot proposed a new operating levy that would address key areas including improving and extending mental health and social-emotional support for students, and academic interventions and support for underachieving students. Approval on the new levy was contingent upon the passage of the renewal of the operating levy in question one. If voters approved the third question, it would ensure that Anoka-Hennepin would be able to sustain mental health and academic support for students provided through one-time federal funds that the school district was scheduled to receive to address the negative impact of the pandemic.

Analysis: The community survey indicated a handful of challenges to address in an information campaign. The district would need to justify the ask of support for a new levy after state funding had been increased, and address rumors or concerns from expected opposition groups. The district planned to develop and execute a thorough communications plan to ensure voter awareness and participation in an effort to achieve the following communications goals in the election season:

- **Encourage participation in the election.** Equip parents/guardians and staff members with resources.
- **Ensure voters understand the ballot.** Provide information in a variety of formats.
- **Information shared is accurate.** Provide clear, accurate information; correct or clarify misinformation.
- **Staff are aware.** Employees understand their communication role and direct voters to additional resources.
- **Remain legal at all times.** The district will comply with all legal requirements of holding/communicating about a referendum.

Communication: Anoka-Hennepin Schools utilized a variety of communications tools and strategies aimed toward achieving the communications goals. The communications team partnered with the Superintendent of Schools, School Board members, School Principals and the Superintendent’s Cabinet Members and department leads to ensure all planned communications strategies were activated as scheduled.

Tactics included a development of a logo/brand identity for the information campaign, coordination of five community information sessions accessible to each geographical area of the school district (streamed online), presentations at staff and parent-teacher organization (PTO) meetings - as well as presentations for businesses, community leaders/elected officials, a 12-week series of articles for district/school e-newsletters targeted at families and staff, a mass-mailed print brochure and tabloid spread to all residences, yard signs for school properties, text message campaign for district families, print and electronic flyers on display at all school entrances, a series of informational videos, a social media campaign, a phone and email hotline to address personalized questions, a tax impact calculator and a website addressing frequently asked questions and all of the resources created. A specific budget was allocated for the Communications and Public Relations department to initiate the Referendum 2021 information campaign.

Evaluation: In conclusion, Anoka-Hennepin Schools successfully passed the two levy renewals in Referendum 2021; and increased voter turnout by approximately 10.7 percent. A total of 27,060 voters participated in Referendum 2021, which was 1,806 more voters participating in the last special election that the school district held in 2017; and a total of 1,391 voters participated in early voting.

District staff personally engaged with voters in a variety of mediums related to the special election, despite social distancing challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Referendum 2021 Hotline fielded over 70 personalized phone calls and over 110 personalized email inquiries about the election. District representatives presented to over 25 PTO groups and 20 community groups; in addition to providing online streaming opportunities throughout the information campaign. While the third question - a new levy - did not pass, the district was pleased that voters participated and engaged with school district representatives, and the Referendum 2021 information campaign met all legal requirements and deadlines. Despite economic challenges many community members faced in the past year, Anoka-Hennepin was thrilled with the community’s continued investment for our schools.
LOGO/BRAND ELEMENTS
The Communications and Public Relations team collaborated with the school district’s lead graphic designer to establish colors, fonts and two logos aligned with the school district brand package to help guide the design of all information campaign materials.

Starting the project with this step ensured brand consistency throughout the project.

WEBSITE: www.ahschools.us/vote2021
- Voting information: www.ahschools.us/votinginfo
- FAQs: www.ahschools.us/ReferendumFAQs
- Calculator: www.ahschools.us/taximpact
- Sample ballot: www.ahschools.us/sampleballot
- Overview on each question:
  - Question 1.
  - Question 2.
  - Question 3.
- Media coverage.
PRINT MATERIALS

- Logo/brand elements: Established for brand consistency.
- Informational brochure - mailed directly to all residences.
- Fact sheet - on display in all school entrances, distributed at community/staff meetings.
- Sample ballot - on display in all school entrances, distributed at community/staff meetings.
- Voting information flyer - on display in all school entrances, distributed at community/staff meetings.
- Presentation boards - on display on easels at all community meetings; re-purposed as social media graphics throughout the information campaign.
- Yard signs - on display in school yards and on district properties in the month leading up to the election.

VIDEOS

The Anoka-Hennepin Schools Communications and Public Relations team worked with a video consultant to create a series of videos for the Referendum 2021 information campaign. Videos featured candid footage of district students and staff, and strategic use of motion graphics.

- Voting information - Exclusive to the Anoka-Hennepin Schools special election: Referendum 2021.
- Overview: Referendum 2021 - Learn the impact.
- Logical consequences: Referendum 2021 - What will happen if Referendum 2021 questions are not approved?
- Referendum 2021 - Question 1 explained.
- Referendum 2021 - Question 2 explained.
- Referendum 2021 - Question 3 explained.

These videos were incorporated into the weekly message campaign, and the videos were shared with staff, district families and the general public via the Anoka-Hennepin Schools website, e-newsletters and social media channels.

The Anoka-Hennepin Schools Communications and Public Relations team worked with technology staff from the school district to create a series of videos highlighting the importance of technology in the classroom, tied to the importance of the renewal of Question 2 - also known as the technology levy. Videos featured candid footage of district students and staff, and testimony from a handful of teachers across the district.

- Tech Tuesday: Meeting students’ needs to prepare for college or career.
- Tech Tuesday: Expanding teachable moments in the classroom.
- Tech Tuesday: Enhancing student interaction and support.
- Tech Tuesday: Enriching lessons in the classroom.

These videos were incorporated into the weekly social media campaign released each Tuesday in the weeks leading up to Election Day, dubbed “Tech Tuesday.” Videos were shared with staff, district families and the general public via the Anoka-Hennepin Schools website, e-newsletters and social media channels.
LIVE STREAM OF COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Anoka-Hennepin Schools streamed five community meetings, strategically hosted in the five geographical clusters of the school district. The meetings were offered via live stream to engage with community members who may not have felt comfortable attending in-person in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Andover-area community meeting
- Anoka-area community meeting
- Blaine-area community meeting
- Champlin-area community meeting
- Coon Rapids-area community meeting

Whether community members attended in person or viewed the meetings online, they were invited to submit feedback and ask questions via an electronic form. District representatives remained on site for approximately an hour after the presentation to address personal questions from residents, families and staff.