

a case study in success

In May 2009, the Yakima School District asked voters to approve a \$114 million bond package to replace and modernize the district's two high schools, and to complete deferred maintenance projects for six other schools. In asking voters to pass the largest bond measure in the district's history, they overcame significant challenges, earning the overwhelming support of the community.



YAKIMA PUBLIC
SCHOOLS

The Yakima School District's recent track record with bond packages was troubling, as previous bond packages in 2006 and 2007 had both failed to win voter support. They were also facing challenges ranging from the global economic downturn to local community perception and demographic issues. We interviewed Yakima School District's Superintendent, Ben Soria, and Communications Director, MaryBeth Wright, to understand how they earned "yes" votes from nearly 70% of Yakima's diverse constituency.





COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

After failing two earlier bond attempts in 2006 and 2007, we took an introspective look by conducting a survey of our community. We learned from this survey that the community was unhappy with many societal issues -- such as education, immigration reform, and gang activities—and much of the blame was placed squarely on our school district’s shoulders.

Because the problems identified by the community were much broader than we as a district could address alone, we initiated an alliance with local leaders in the business and faith communities to discuss what we could do together to make a difference.

We came up with a character development initiative to focus on a desired trait as the “word of the month,” which we launched community-wide. For example, if the “word of the month” was “friendliness”, students talked about and practiced friendliness on a daily basis while at school. At the same

time, more than 40 business and church reader boards displayed this word of the month, and friendliness was discussed regularly at faith community services, as well as Boy Scouts, the local YMCA, and other community meetings.

“We are ecstatic and believe that passing the bond was a total community effort.”

Ben Soria, Superintendent

The resulting sense of community partnership was instrumental in passing our bond measure. When the time came to campaign for the bond measure, the business and church reader boards all displayed “vote yes for school bond” messages. Within only a few blocks of driving around town, it became obvious that the bond was broadly supported by the community.

STUDENT ADVOCACY

We believe that the tipping point for our success was the astounding groundswell of support and participation from our high school students. Student leaders from both of our high schools approached us and rallied 1,000 volunteers out of our total high school population of 4,000 students to campaign for the bond measure.

While it was clear that this group of students would not directly benefit from the new facilities, they felt it was important to help pass the bond issue and leave a legacy for future students. Since district personnel could not provide campaign assistance, the students recruited a recent college graduate who had majored in political science to act as their campaign advisor.

The high level of energy and participation by our high school students was absolutely key to our success. We can’t give them enough credit for the work they did to pass the bond package!



“This bond’s our legacy. We’re going to be able to drive by with our children some day and say, ‘Look, that’s what we did, as a school, as a community.’”

*Jordan Lehrman
Student Campaign Co-Coordinator*

KEY STUDENT CAMPAIGN ACTIVITIES

- :: Assisted with visits to 7,000 households
- :: Registered people to vote
- :: Assisted with telephoning nearly 3,000 voters
- :: Mobilized sign waving on street corners
- :: Spoke at service organization meetings
- :: Made radio appearances and advertisements
- :: Held student press conference
- :: Designed and produced “Rock the Vote” t-shirts
- :: Held student march/rally, barbecue and concert at a local park

NO NEW TAXES

The economic downturn posed a real challenge as people wanted to support the package but were concerned about the economy. The school board – undecided about whether to move forward with the May bond election – felt that another survey would help provide solid information on which to base a decision.

In December 2008, another voter survey was conducted to find out what the community would be willing to support. The school district did not pay for this survey as it was funded by “For a Better Tomorrow,” a local nonprofit organization. Our survey

results indicated that 64% of voters polled would support a new bond package if their taxes would not increase. Based on this information, we developed a plan that actually decreased taxes by 7 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value.

Another great economic message was that by approving \$114 million of local bond money, we would leverage an additional \$104 million of state matching money. A “yes” vote approving the \$114 million of local funding would bring a total of \$218 million of construction money into the local economy.

HIGH VISIBILITY

We did a lot of things that are not necessarily common in bond campaigns. While we had lawn signs and brochures, we also bought advertising space – which was partially paid for by a business partner – on public transit buses. In addition, we asked business partners to donate their billboards for campaign messages, resulting in donation of a highly visible 30-foot-wide billboard by an overpass near the mall.

A special advertising campaign, “Better Schools Make Better Communities,” was funded and implemented by a variety of local professionals. For example, an ad was purchased by local attorneys promoting the message that Yakima’s legal community supports the bond issue because good schools build good communities. Similar ads were produced by local doctors, contractors, building trades, and realtors – all with the same basic message of supporting quality local schools.

Because we are the largest Latino-majority district in the state with 63% Hispanic population, we knew it was critical to reach out with a diverse and inclusive message. Targeted outreach included:

- :: Quarterly Spanish Forums initiated in Fall 2000 to create ongoing communication
- :: District Informational Brochure produced in both English and Spanish, mailed to more than 30,000 households
- :: Spanish language robocalls (3-4 times) to specific targeted households

LESSONS LEARNED

The major lesson we learned is the value of establishing ongoing communication and relationships with a broad spectrum of our community. Passing a bond measure takes more than brochures, lawn signs, and a few months of campaigning. For us, it took a serious effort to understand more generally how the community views the school district.

In our case, we couldn’t rush into a bond campaign without first expanding our thinking to address the broader concerns, such as we did with character development education. The faith-based partnership and character education are uncommon approaches to building bond support, but we believe these overarching and subtle strategies strengthened community relationships that led to our success.

Another good lesson came from listening to the community in our December survey when they strongly said “no new taxes.” We created a package to give voters what they wanted – and we highlighted in campaign brochures, signs and advertisements that we listened to them in structuring the package.

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