

Mercer Island School District Learns by Listening

We interviewed Dr. Gary Plano, Superintendent, and Dean Mack, Chief Finance/Operations Officer, to understand how the Mercer Island School District transformed their approach to planning a bond package that went from a big LOSS to a big WIN for the entire community.



With a K-12 student population of approximately 4300, the Mercer Island School District enjoys a wide-spread reputation for quality and excellence. This tradition of excellence is a major reason many families make Mercer Island their home. Achievement test scores at the elementary, middle, and high school levels are consistently the highest in Washington State and the district maintains a graduation rate of over 95 percent.

While Mercer Island's educational delivery is forward-thinking, the District's facilities had not kept up with nearly two decades worth of population growth. In addition to aging school facilities, students were

housed in 37 portable classrooms which did not provide appropriate educational environments, nor would they handle the District's continued growth projected into the future.

In April 2012, Mercer Island School District proposed a \$196 million bond package to address its facilities' needs. The bond measure failed by a very large margin and the District realized that they needed to back up and LISTEN carefully to the community to understand what it was community members valued and wanted to accomplish in upgrading schools and providing educational facilities.

As a result of this LISTENING approach, Mercer Island School District prepared an entirely different bond package which voters passed with a historically high approval rating of 74% YES votes in February 2014.

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LISTEN TO THE COMMUNITY

Plano: After our bond failed badly in 2012, we conducted three community telephone polls with a local research company. We learned from the polls that the community resisted the 2012 package which keyed on the message of tearing down existing schools and rebuilding “21st century schools.” The board began listening sessions with the community, inviting people to talk about what they didn’t like about the old bond and what they thought about the future. Following that, I worked with the board to study a number of options to deal with overcrowding. From that work, the board allowed me to hire a community engagement firm to spend six to eight weeks engaging the community in meetings as well as launch a social media platform called “mind mixer” for people to participate in identifying various solutions and engage with each other.

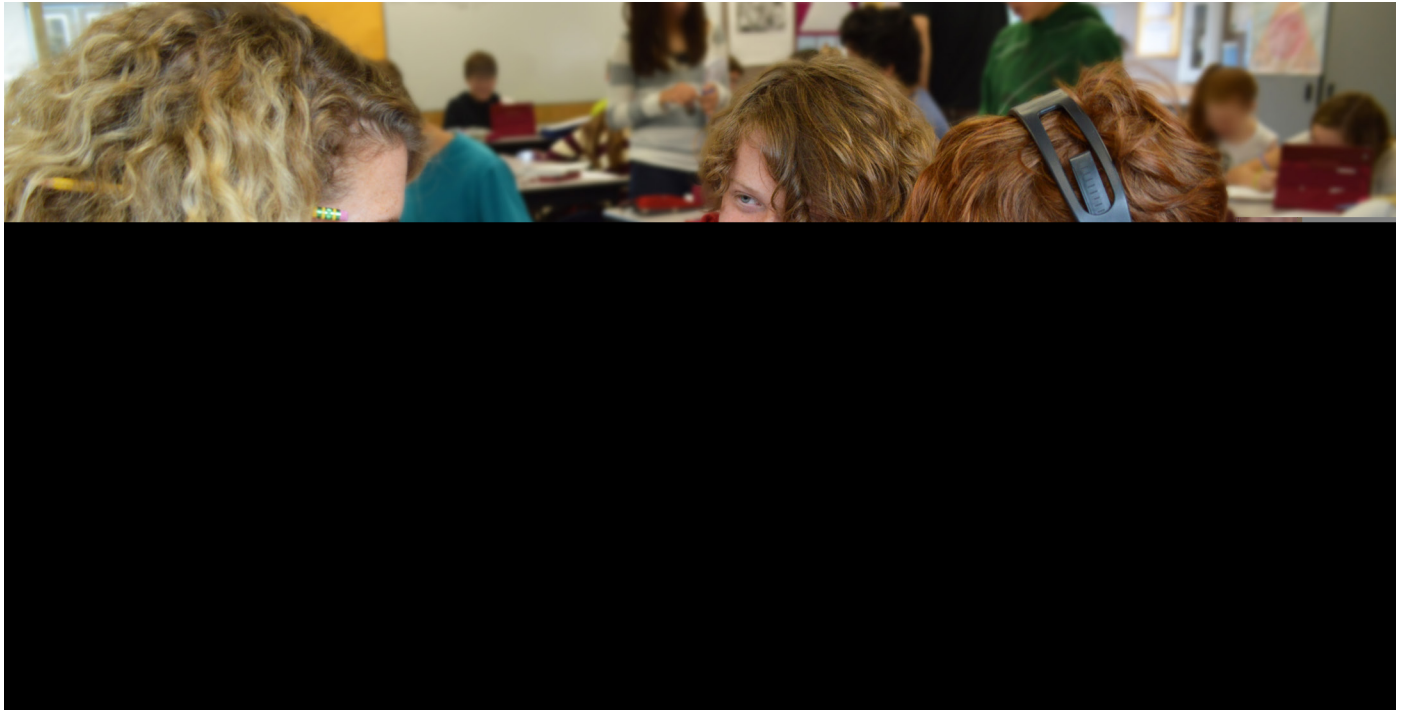
Mack: When passing a bond issue, you are trying to establish both what is the need and also what is the community willing to support – sometimes it takes a bond issue or two to really find that out. Generally it has taken us a few tries over the last

three decades to pass bond measures. Our community likes to be very thoughtful and deliberate in a planned fashion when setting goals and accomplishing those goals. I would say that both times we failed bond issues in the last three decades; it is because the planning was overly ambitious and we were trying to do too much at once.

Plano: When we went back and really listened to our community, we quickly learned that we couldn’t sell the concept of “21st century learning” as it was too vague of an idea and people didn’t know what it meant so it didn’t resonate. However, throughout the process the community learned when Mercer Island School District last built a brand new school in 1963, President John F. Kennedy was in the White House—and since that time, educational delivery has completely changed. Many realized that our population has grown significantly over the past few decades using portable classrooms, and our school facilities have not kept pace with population.

Mack: When we realized that what our community really wanted was practical solutions to overcrowding, that issue became the focus for this whole bond package. For the 2014 election, we came up with an entirely different proposal that cost voters a lot less than the failed bond while building additional capacity to house students from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Working with the community, we outlined a bond package totaling \$102.6 million comprised of \$98.8 million of local funds and \$3.8 million in state match to fund the following projects:

- :: One additional Elementary School
- :: Redesign of the Middle School campus, including addition of 14 classrooms and building a new gymnasium, commons, kitchen, administrative area, and library
- :: Addition of 10 High School classrooms, four of which are specifically for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education



Plano: We also learned from listening that people wanted to know what the schools would look like after the bond projects. We used money from our previous capital levy to hire Mahlum Architects to provide educational specifications and actively engage the community in the schematic design phase for all projects prior to the bond election. This investment really paid off as a citizens committee formed organically months before the board authorized the bond resolution in September of 2013. This loosely organized group of citizens wanted to see the next bond be successful, so they began meeting in community coffee klatches and holding their own public meetings. It was interesting that the citizens committee supporting the 2014 bond measure was formed from a composite of people previously on both the NO and the YES campaigns from the 2012 election. In fact, a large number of the members of the new citizens committee came from the previous NO group and they were not people who had traditionally voted against school measures. We learned that they felt badly about the defeat of the 2012

package but more importantly wanted to help galvanize the community around overcrowded schools and come up with a workable solution they could support with a YES vote in 2014.

SOLVE THE RIGHT PROBLEMS

Mack: The citizens committee framed the 2014 bond package as an overcrowding solution for buildings that were long overdue for remodeling and additions. The key message from the District also focused on solving overcrowding. We showed the community that we have overcrowded schools that will only get more overcrowded and that portable classrooms are not optimal spaces for learning. Our bond proposal focused on strategies to solve the present problems and to provide children born in this era the same opportunities as previous generations, by providing permanent structures as the most appropriate way to support education.

Plano: Our surveying showed that the community understood the District was growing and needed additional classroom space. They also believed in keeping most of the existing schools until their 'useful life' was realized. In other words, they wanted to proceed in phases and not all at once. For example we designed the middle school as an entirely new school but it will be built in phases. The 2014 bond measure included funds to build a first phase for the new middle school by adding classrooms and building common spaces (gymnasium, library, multi-purpose room, etc.) to handle the current student population as well as handling projected growth.

Mack: We felt very good going into the 2014 election because we were getting positive feedback from the community. This is a very active community, so if there are negative thoughts they are very well voiced – and there was none of that going on. We felt the election outcome would be positive, but we had no idea it would pass with one of the highest approval levels in state history!



Mercer Island School District's education framework is articulated in its innovative VISION 2020:

Enabling students to succeed in this complex digital, thinking and global world, as we help them find their passion and inspiration for learning.

Vision 2020 is specifically designed with a 21st century body of knowledge in mind, where students can access information instantly. For example, all 8-12th grade students in the District currently have Ipads or other handheld devices to enhance learning. Starting next year, all students in grades 5-12 will use 1:1 devices to access and demonstrate their learning.

Thinking and Process Skills such as critical thinking, creativity, innovation, collaboration, communication, problem solving, and information and technology literacy are explicitly taught in multi-disciplinary fashion and are hallmarks of its academic programs.

The district provides a nimble curriculum that responds to global realities and where students often have global audience.

Plano: We felt the best case YES vote would total 65% with most of the YES's coming from parents. In the last election, only 25% of our District's parents voted. Based on using a demographic analysis to isolate voters likely to be parents, in the 2014 election they voted at over 50%. We were thrilled to find out that many seniors and others without children in the schools came out in support of this measure. The message of overcrowding resonated with them even though some may be on fixed income and don't have children in school--yet they felt it a civic responsibility to support this work in their community.

COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

Mack: All districts struggle with identifying what exactly will resonate with their specific community. It is very hard to do, but reach out to the community and educate them on your needs. Then listen very carefully to what it is that they value and for what people are willing to provide funding. We were able to take

the community's input and actually show designs of projects that accomplished their goals within cost constraints the community felt were appropriate – that was really the basis for our success with voters.

Plano: We also learned that the school board is one of the most critical groups to have engaged in the entire process. The board can't delegate its responsibility to a facilities committee or advisory board—which is what happened in the previous bond measure. As Superintendent, I advise other districts to get your school board involved in owning the process and understanding all the issues as a school board; connection and buy in is critically important. Also, engage your community early and often in the specifics of what it is you are trying to do by listening carefully – then communicate, communicate, and communicate again!