

NOTE: Following is information given out during a Panel Discussion from a Levy Workshop sponsored by SEE back in 2003. This is an excellent document in detailing Districts 196 year long effort to pass their referendum. Although these speakers are not part of today's panel, I wanted to pass this communication on to you for your information.

~Deb Griffiths (9-12-08)

SUCCESSFUL REFERENDUM STRATEGIES

Panel Discussion Sponsored by Schools for Equity in Education (SEE)

July 30, 2003, Holiday Inn-Bloomington

Set the Stage in District 196: December 2000

- Less than a month removed from the sting of a second consecutive levy referendum defeat
- Preparing for a series of six highly publicized community meetings designed to seek input on where the public felt the next \$6 million in budget cuts should come from
- Public trust seemed at an all-time low, in part because an organized opposition group called C.A.R.E. had been successful in using misinformation and unsubstantiated allegations of waste to spread its message of trust

The Top 10 Things that Worked for District 196

(Listed chronologically, not in order of rank or importance)

1. Held District Dialogue public roundtable meetings

- Superintendent scheduled six meetings immediately following our second consecutive levy defeat in November 2000.
- Total attendance topped 1,200 at the six meetings combined.
- Each meeting started with 5 to 10 minutes of introduction from the superintendent; immediately after his comments, the superintendent split the large group into smaller discussion groups of about 30 to 40 people per group and assigned two district administrators to moderate and take notes in each group
- The idea with the smaller groups is to stimulate a face-to-face discussion of issues among neighbors in a circle, instead of a shouting match of one-liners coming from a podium

2. We listened and made decisions that reflected community input

- Used input from District Dialogues as the basis for making budget recommendations. Strongest theme from the District Dialogue meetings was to “keep the cuts as far away from the classroom as possible;” even more specifically, “makes cuts to transportation first in order to protect the classroom.”
- We made cuts to transportation services and did not cut additional teaching positions (80 were eliminated as part of the previous year's cuts).
- We were falsely accused numerous times of “targeting cuts” in student transportation in order to “get people's attention.” To put it politely, the people got exactly what they asked for – both with the failed levy referendum (they got lower taxes and more budget cuts) and in the things they wanted to see cut (student transportation) and spared (class size and teachers).
- Ultimately, the school board decided to bring a levy referendum in November 2001 based on overwhelming support from the community to do so.

3. We gave total commitment to improving communication

- People said they wanted more information and communication, and we gave it to them.
- We took our story to the public like never before – through print, broadcast and electronic media – and ultimately built a solid case for ourselves and our position by offering more information, more frequently and in more convenient ways.

4. We repeated ourselves over and over ...and over

- We kept our messages simple and focused, and we kept telling the same story over and over again. For example, at one point, all we had to say was “47th out of 48” and most people knew immediately that we were talking about our metro ranking in expenditures per pupil. People knew and understood our messages.

5. We established a Budget Advisory Council made up of citizens and staff

- Serves as an advisory group to the board of education, but more importantly, the BAC provides a credible third party to present and distribute financial information to the public.

6. We launched the Backpack Online email list service

- In part of the Superintendent's communications plan. The list serve gave us direct and immediate access to as many parents and other district residents as we could encourage to subscribe.
- With aggressive marketing of this new, free information service, more than 5,000 subscribers signed on Backpack Online within the first six months.

- The Supt's News list provides information directly from the Superintendent's Office on average of twice each week – information about board meetings, important decisions and issues facing the district, student accomplishments ... and the list goes on.
- Currently, Backpack Online offers the Superintendent's News list, a School Closings list and the opportunity for each of our 31 schools to operate specific lists of their own.

7. Launched updated and revised district web site

- A districtwide survey in April 2001 revealed that nearly 90 percent of our households have access to the Internet. We have reached critical mass – the web must be an integral part of school communications.
- The new District 196 site offers quicker navigation and is designed with key elements of a media web site, including timely front-page articles and useful applications for parents and residents.
- During the budget cutting process in spring 2001, we used the web site to provide residents with a list of the superintendent's budget recommendations prior to the first board meeting where they were presented.
- We continue to drive people to our site for the information, and we keep them coming back with useful applications like the new Check Please service that allows parents to check their child's meal account balance online.

8. We clearly defined and communicated the outcomes of both a "yes" and "no" vote on the levy

- Gave the public an advance list of the superintendent's recommended budget cuts that would be implemented if the third consecutive levy failed in November 2001, as well as the list of budget restorations that would be made if the levy passes.
- Public had several opportunities to comment on the recommended cuts and restorations, which were ultimately approved by the board well in advance of the November 2001 election date.
- We were criticized in previous levy campaigns for not providing enough specifics on how the district would use levy funds.

9. We aggressively addressed all accusations and misinformation

- There was organized opposition to the last three levy referendums in our district from a group that called itself C.A.R.E. (Citizens for Accountable Responsible Education).
- Members of C.A.R.E. were successful in negatively influencing the levy votes in 1999 and 2000 with a strategy of making accusations and spreading misinformation to create an atmosphere of mistrust (SUV example).
- Starting in December 2000, with our District Dialogue meetings and subsequent communications efforts, we were very aggressive in responding to any and all accusations, rumors or misinformation, whether in a letter to the editor, paid advertisement, campaign flyer or on the C.A.R.E. email discussion group.

10. We let the community discuss, debate and decide what they wanted.

- Public meetings and electronic communications to provide opportunities for public input and discussion.
- More information to help people understand and form opinions on the questions.
- The opportunity to put the matter to a vote for the third year in a row in what was a school board election year.

The Positive Result

- On November 6, 2001, nearly 50 percent of all registered voters in District 196 went to the polls to cast votes in a school-only election; there were no other issues on the ballot in any of our communities.
 - A total of 36,154 votes were cast, including nearly 23,000 yes votes, or approximately 64 percent of the total vote.
 - As a result of the successful levy, we were able to avoid additional budget cuts and restore transportation services and 33 teaching positions of the 80 that were eliminated two years earlier.

The Aftermath

- We continue to communicate as much or more than we did in the weeks and months leading up to the levy referendum vote, and that is not likely to change anytime soon.
- School districts must communicate aggressively in order to survive in today's political climate. If we don't our opponents will define the issues and the outcomes.
- As a result of our experience, we have a much more involved, informed and empowered community in District 196. And for that, we are better.

With that, I'd like to turn it over to Wendy Swanson Choi, a District 196 parent and one of the founding members of UNITE 196. Wendy...

The UNITE (United Neighborhoods in Total/Well Rounded Education) 196 parent group of Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan initiated and ran the levy campaign primarily through raising awareness of how the additional levy funds would matter to various constituencies and through improving community participation in the funding decisions, as well as managing other key campaign components.

Following is a timeline of key actions UNITE 196 took in response to district actions. UNITE 196 actions re in bold print and the district actions are in italics.

Timeline of UNITE 196 Parent Group in Bold Print

December

- *District holds round of community dialogues to discuss second levy defeat.*
- **Parents for UNITE 196 to provide accurate information to community about public education, advocate for a quality, well-rounded education for the children, and promote a healthy community by keeping public schools strong (inform, advocate, promote).**
- **Collect names, emails, schools, phone numbers, and addresses of those interested in updates re school funding.**
- **Develop website, www.unite196.org.**
- ***Determine committees and committee chairs (website, fundraising, research/board speeches/letters to editor, community outreach, community signs including lawn signs and buttons, volunteer coordinator, parent rep coordinator)**
- *District enhances communication with public by enhancing the district website including detailed financial information.*

January

- **Meet with other districts that passed levies.**
- **Identify parent neighborhood representatives from all district schools.**
- **Continue to collect names, emails, schools, phone numbers, and addresses of those interested in updates re school funding.**
- **Meet with finance director and school representatives to discuss financial situation.**

February

- *District establishes a citizen Budget Advisory Council to involve community members with financial expertise in budget decisions.*
- **UNITE parent selected to serve on the Budget Advisory Council.**
- **Host legislative forum to discuss public school issues.**
- **Continue to collect names, emails, schools, phone numbers, and addresses of those interested in updates re school funding.**
- ***Meet with parent representatives to define roles/expectations.**

March-May

- **Meet with Schools for Equity in Education.**
- **Continue to collect names, emails, schools, phone numbers, and addresses of those interested in updates re school funding.**
- *Superintendent makes recommendations for cuts to programs and services and revenue enhancements.*
- ***Send update to email list re superintendent recommendations and upcoming public hearing.**
- *District holds public hearing to allow for reaction to superintendent recommendations.*
- **Parents bring up possibility of another levy attempt at the public hearing.**
- *School board concludes there must be a groundswell of community support before another levy attempt.*
- **Send update to email list re board position on levy.**
- *District meets with key community leaders and continues to provide updates and information to them.*
- *District develops public expectations surveys to be turned in by 9/4.*

June-July

- **Meet with key community leaders like legislators, city council members, mayors, members of parish and chambers of commerce, athletic association and foundation leaders to solicit support.**
- **Continue to collect names, emails, schools, phone numbers, and addresses of those interested in updates re school funding.**
- **File as a group promoting a levy (identify treasurer).**
- **Formally make the case in support of putting another levy on the ballot.**
- **Send update to email list re UNITE 196 case for putting levy on the ballot.**
- *District launches "Backpack Online" information service to provide accurate information to subscribers.*
- *District responds to community input re recommendations for cuts to programs and services and revenue enhancements with adjustments.*
- **July 23 the Budget Advisory Council Recommends levy referendum (length and amount) in a majority report. There was also a minority report.*
- **Raise money for campaign including marketing expertise. Involve as many in the community as possible in the effort. Interview and hire a public relations firm.**

- ***Develop flyers with basic messages re why it is worth supporting (dropping to last in per pupil funding in metro, can't provide essential transportation or healthy activities for kids after school).**

August

- *Board of Education makes preliminary recommendations for cuts to programs and services and revenue enhancements.*
- *District conducts another round of "Public Roundtable Discussions" re BOE recommendations.*
- *Board of Education makes further adjustments to recommendations based on public input. The BOE clearly defines what the levy will restore if approved and what will be eliminated without additional levy funds as well as revenue enhancements.*
- **Send update to email list re upcoming board meeting levy proposal.**
- **Rally attendance for this board meeting and organize speakers (demonstrate a groundswell of support).**
- *Board of Education concurs with Budget Advisory Council and public input to propose putting levy on ballot.*
- **Raise money. Plan for what budget will allow: lit drops, direct mailings, lawn signs, ad in papers. Be specific in fundraising goals.**
- **Hold neighborhood meetings. Provide kits to parents hosting the meetings. ??? Invite district administrators and board members to answer questions.**
- **Continue to collect names, emails, schools, phone numbers, and addresses of those interested in updates re school funding.**
- **Identify key lawn sign locations. Check city ordinances.**

September

- **Research group develops *achievement/accountability report, *frequently asked questions and answers, main messages.**
- ***Send update to email list re upcoming levy decision at board meeting.**
- **Rally attendance for this board meeting and organize speakers (demonstrate a groundswell of support). Key community leaders voice support.**
- *Board of Education approves putting levy on ballot. Final levy proposal approved including impact of no levy or unsuccessful levy and impact of successful levy. Superintendent gives strong power point presentation. *"What do you want?"*
- **Provide information (flyers) and collect names of volunteers at athletic sign ups, school open houses, orientation nights, and back to school kick offs. Provide kits to parents for these back to school events with instructions, *volunteer sign up sheets, *frequently asked questions and answers, *flyers, and *signs for example.**
- **Volunteer coordinator begins to organize volunteers for literature drop, phoning, and lawn sign coordination. Set goals. UNITE 196 involved about 300 residents covering their own neighborhoods distributing about 35,000 door hangers.**
- **Prepare map for literature drop.**
- **Be a Hero Rally in support of the levy.**
- **Continue to collect names, emails, schools, phone numbers, and addresses of those interested in updates re school funding.**
- **Establish mail and phone lists.**

October

- **Begin phoning.**
- **Organize letters to editor weekly.**
- *Superintendent's News direct mailing sent out with info clearly defining impact of unsuccessful levy versus successful.*
- **Put up lawn signs (3,000 by end of October).**
- *Levy Referendum *"At a Crossroads" direct mailing sent out clearly defining impact of unsuccessful levy versus successful.*
- ***Send out UNITE 196 Go To Vote direct mailing with simple message.**
- **Place ads in local papers (Local Republicans for Strong Community and *United Leaders for a Strong Community)**
- **Literature Drop**
- **Levy Referendum Official Notice and Information Sent Out (If levy successful... If levy not successful... Tax Impact...)*
- *Principals send out *"Just the Facts".*
- ***Southern Twin Cities Association of REALTORS issues press release in support of levy.**

November

- **Make Go To Vote calls.**
- **Put up 33 large billboard signs up at key intersections.**
- **Move signs to yards near polling places.**