

2011 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award Entry

PROJECT SYNOPSIS

Elementary Neighborhood School Renewal Project

In May 2010, Bloomington Public Schools initiated the *Elementary Neighborhood School Renewal Project* (ENSRP) to redraw its 10 elementary school boundaries. Population shifts and a liberal parent choice (intra-district transfer) practice, coupled with the fact elementary attendance areas were last changed in 1982, were the primary factors driving the project's need. The District's Community Relations team (Executive Director and Communications Specialist) played an integral role in developing the ENSRP, including the project outline and timeline, establishment of a 34-member parent and staff Task Force, and a comprehensive communications and public engagement plan. The Executive Director of Community Relations co-facilitated the ENSRP Task Force that was charged by the Bloomington Board of Education to develop new attendance area recommendations.

On January 10, 2011, the Bloomington Board of Education unanimously (7-0) approved the ENSRP recommendations to "right size" its elementary schools. Full implementation will occur at the start of the 2011-12 school year. The school board's adoption concluded the ENSRP Task Force's work that included hundreds of hours of meetings and deliberations, community conversations, public forums and dozens of parent feedback submissions. While no school re-districting (boundary) effort is fully supported by parents and students, and often results in fractured communities, the District received high praise from parents, staff and media, for its efforts to inform and engage parents in the process to reach a solution that best met the needs of all students.

The following Project Summary is how the communications and public engagement campaign played a vital role in the successful *Elementary Neighborhood School Renewal Project*.

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RESEARCH:

Bloomington (MN) Public Schools is a suburban district of 10,200 students, serving the City of Bloomington (Pop. 85,200). Over the past 6 years, city leaders have focused on a community revitalization effort leading to residential and commercial/industrial growth. The resulting population and demographic shift has had an increasing impact on the number and diversity of students residing in the district's 10 elementary school attendance areas. Some school enrollments trended upward, others trended downward. As a whole, student enrollment was not matched to individual school capacity. Other factors influencing the project's need:

- Market research and achievement data showed an increase in the number of classroom seats needed for the District's unique and innovative program (Dimensions Academy) for profoundly gifted students.
- Racial isolation and concentrations of poverty in some attendance areas is contributing to a persistent achievement gap.
- Parents exercise considerable intra-district choice. The District embraces parent choice, but boundary adjustments were necessary to ease the impact of yearly movement on building enrollments.
- Elementary school attendance areas have not been changed since 1982.

The ENSRP's primary outcomes: a) balance enrollments to each site's capacity, including adjusting for growth and decline; b) create space for expanded programs and initiatives; and c) reduce concentrated poverty or racial isolation. The goal of the ENSRP Communication Plan (CP): *Engage parents and community (public opinion leaders) to build awareness of and support for boundary adjustments.*

PLANNING/ANALYSIS:

The Community Relations team developed the CP, and sought feedback for suggested improvements by elementary principals, the superintendent's cabinet, and the ENSRP Task Force. The CP identified five primary stakeholder groups – Parents, Community, Principals, Board of Education and Media – that were keys to successfully implementing the plan and achieving its goal. The CP also identified a series of specific strategies and tools/methods – unique in some cases to each stakeholder group – to: 1) propagate information in a structured and controlled manner; 2) improve the interactive nature of communication; 3) hear from stakeholders in a variety of forums; and 4) gauge parent and community sentiment as a means of evaluating the process as it unfolded.

The Community Relations team believed even the best strategies fail if they are not dynamic. So the CP included different methods of collecting feedback throughout the process, which allowed the team to evaluate the results and refine those strategies and messages that fell short of expectations.

EXECUTION and COMMUNICATION:

The following activities were carried out in the nine-month project by the Community Relations team:

- Executive Director co-facilitated the ENSRP Task Force, thus allowing for communication and public engagement strategies to be incorporated into the group's work throughout the process. As a result, the Task Force gained a better understanding of the importance of parent involvement and used their feedback to make better decisions about the new attendance areas.
- Created an interactive *ENSRP* website that was consistently updated and became a critical component for sharing information. The web site was also designed to track "hits" to determine if key messages resonated with stakeholders, and to garner feedback. All communication efforts drove stakeholders to the web site.
- Developed 20 visual presentations for a host of parent, community, staff, PTA, and school board meetings.
- Designed a series of *Community Conversations* – strategically scheduled throughout the process – to inform and engage parents/community, and help the Task Force understand community expectations for adjusting elementary school boundaries. The first two *Conversations* were designed for small group interactions with

Task Force members co-facilitating the discussion. The third *Conversation* format was designed for parents working in small groups to review new attendance area map options and provide pros/cons. Community Relations team analyzed all feedback for the Task Force to use in its deliberative work. *Community Conversations* consisted of two sessions per date, and attracted between 250-300 parents for each session. The formats were designed to maximize public engagement, while reducing the chance for damaging large group advocacy or a “mob mentality” that could shut down all voices from being heard.

- Organized special meetings for diverse populations, including a Saturday picnic at a housing complex of low-income families to share information and respond to questions. Engaged Office of Educational Equity to make personal phone calls to families most impacted by boundary changes. Interpreters were enlisted to help translate for non-English speaking families at all public meetings, forums and events.
- Secured PTSA Council (parent reps from all District schools) and local media endorsement.
- Developed series of Talking Points/Key Messages and FAQ’s for use by the Task Force, elementary school principals and staff, and School Board members to ensure consistency of information and messaging.
- Monitored a parent’s blog and provided responses to questions/comments generated on the blog. Responded to dozens of emails and letters directed to the School Board, Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, or Task Force. Authored parent letters and communications from the Superintendent and School Board chair. Multiple messages were employed to counter any attempts by negative individuals and/or groups.
- Wrote numerous articles for *School Pages* (community newsletter) and INK Spot (employee e-newsletter).
- Worked closely with multiple media outlets and reporters, including one-on-one meetings to ensure fair and balanced reporting, particularly because there were attempts to “lump” BPS into a neighboring school district’s more contentious school boundary realignment process. An editorial from the local paper that covers both school districts praised BPS for its approach and transparent process.
- Presented “Image Builders or Breakers” customer service workshop for principals and secretaries as part of the boundary transition plan to prepare for families who would be attending a new school.

EVALUATION:

Communication and public engagement efforts were designed to inform and involve key stakeholders, but none more important than the target group of elementary parents – those most affected by the approved boundary changes. We were successful in this effort based on both a qualitative and quantitative application. Hundreds of elementary school parents were engaged and spoke out – for and against – the new attendance area options at numerous public forums throughout the process. Dozens more shared their feedback via online opportunities. Suggestions from parents were heard and incorporated in revisions to the attendance area map options. Ultimately, the school board unanimously supported an attendance area map that not only attained the ENSRP’s primary outcomes, but also had the least impact on families. This unanimous support spoke volumes to our community, and reinforced the painstaking work of the ENSRP Task Force.

As we analyzed the feedback collected, it was clear parents understood the rationale for the ENSRP, but many hoped the final outcome would not affect them directly. To be clear, not all parents were satisfied with the final decision. As with all school re-districting, it is unrealistic to expect all parents are supportive. The best we could hope for is that parents were heard and engaged in the process, for each then believes they have a vested interest or stake in the outcome. For a majority of our parents they accepted the process and outcome (less than 1,000 of the 4,600 elementary students were directly affected). It is our experience that behavioral change is a long-term outcome. Parents are more likely to accept change over time and as children adjust to their new surroundings. We believe acceptance will also come sooner because of our continued efforts to communicate transition plans to help parents and students become acclimated with their new school. By reducing the obstacle of fear and unknowing through communication and involvement, we will hasten the acceptance and continue to build goodwill among our schools and parents.

It should be noted, we decided to delay conducting a parent survey (supported by a noted researcher) because results were likely to be a mix of responses based solely on how parents perceived their children to be impacted by an attendance area change. We then considered posing only questions related to whether parents felt they were informed and/or engaged in the process, but again, the researcher felt the data would be skewed because of a “backlash effect” based on anger that may not be reflective of the process, only the outcome. A parent survey will be conducted in Spring 2012, as one of the District’s comprehensive communication plan’s strategies.