

Wichita Public Schools

Our Kids, Our Schools and Our Future – Bond 2008

Research

- Although USD 259 had successfully passed a bond issue in 2000, it didn't address all of the district's critical needs.
- To assess community support for a new bond issue (and other initiatives), the district contracted with Wichita State University's Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs to conduct a **survey of Wichita voters**. In January 2006, results of the survey, with responses from nearly 6,000 citizens, were shared with the BOE. A strong community affirmation of the investments made in Wichita children through the April 2000 bond and a glimpse of public support for future investments were reflected.
- In 2007, a community steering team reviewed the district's **Facility Master Plan** and identified **\$536.5 million** in critical needs. They recommended the Board of Education pursue a bond issue.
- The board engaged citizens in further dialog and ultimately approved a **\$350 million** bond issue to be placed on the ballot for May 2008. Goals of the bond issue:
 - Renovate or rebuild aging and unsafe **physical education, athletic and fine arts facilities**
 - Add classrooms to **reduce class size** and address rapid growth in the northeast and southeast parts of the city.
 - Support the **end of busing for desegregation** by constructing new and renovated schools in northeast Wichita.
 - Improve student safety by **adding storm shelter safe rooms** at all schools not already so equipped.
- **Careful analysis was done on issues** expected to be raised. This included a review of mill levies of surrounding districts, operating budgets and per pupil expenditures for other large districts in Kansas and Sedgewick County; projected enrollment for the next five years, estimated tax increases for homeowners and a review of successful bond issues in Kansas 2000-2008.
- The district contracted with WSU's Center for Economic Development and Business Research to determine the **economic impact of the 2000 bond issue**. Their results were presented to the BOE in Feb. 2008, and revealed that "the 2000 bond issue's expenditures had an annual average impact between 2000 and 2007 of 1,357 jobs with an annual average economic impact of \$41.5 million. At its peak in the 2005-06 year, the bond issue supported 2,259 construction positions." This information would be of critical importance as the Wichita community was now experiencing job loss in key aircraft and manufacturing companies.
- An analysis of **voter precincts** from the successful 2000 bond election was conducted, broken down by BOE district to further define strategies for the 2008 bond education campaign. Also weighed was the potential impact of the "Obama factor" with respect to African-American voter turnout as a key benefit of the bond plan was to support the end of busing for desegregation.
- While voter support of the district's 2000 bond had been high, a 2008 bond vote would take place in a much different climate. **Challenges were identified** including:
 - Economic downturn. Particularly hard hit were the airplane manufacturers and Wichita's largest employers.
 - Change in leadership as Wichita's well-liked superintendent of 10-years left, leaving the district with an Interim head.
 - Vocal anti-tax constituency that was organized and well-financed.
 - Some areas of school improvement would face criticism for being labeled as elitist - "swimming pools and tennis courts."
 - The \$350 million price tag would make it the largest school bond issue in the state's history, for some, too high.
- To gain voter approval for the 2008 bond, it would be critical to educate Wichitans about the need for, and benefits of facility improvement, to reinforce trust in the district's fiscal responsibility in spite of a change in leadership, and to overcome objections of vocal anti-tax opposition groups.

Planning

- Two internal groups were formed. 1.) The **Facilities Advisory Council (FAC)** to develop and oversee a communications plan to reach both internal and external audiences. 2.) The **Internal Action Team** to work in the trenches, targeting specific groups or activities (i.e. parents of student athletes, coaches, parents of fine arts students, etc.)
- The common goals to 1.) **educate** and inform employees, parents, volunteers and community members about facility needs and the specifics of the proposed bond referendum and 2.) **mobilize** employees and parents to vote/participate.
- The Marketing Division provided counsel to both groups and leveraged its resources in the education campaign. This included the staff newsletter, TV channels, e-mail system, graphic design of print materials, website, technical assistance to support speaking engagements and extensive media relations work.
- Concerned parents, students, staff and community members formed a pro-bond organization, Citizens Alliance for Responsible Education (CARE) to actively spread the "**Vote Yes for Kids**" message. They **collaborated** with internal teams on the education campaign.
- Business leaders were identified who were willing to use their cachet to support the bond and educate their peers.
- As Wichita's fourth-largest employer, with over 9,200 full and part time staff, it was critical to develop strategies to **educate "our own."**

The marketing director met with the assistant superintendents to discuss ways to effectively **engage schools**. These conversations led to their agreement to put updates, including action steps (drafted by Marketing) in their newsletters to principals; to allow time at each principals' meeting for bond updates; and to involve them in speaker's training so they could be prepared to visit schools and talk about the bond. The Superintendent held forums with employee groups; certified, classified and retirees.

- Marketing staff took advantage of **professional development** opportunities to learn best practices regarding the issue, including NSPRA's national conferences, review of current literature and research.
- **Speaker's training** was provided for all staff, students and community members identified to educate internal and external audiences.

Communication

Wichita Public Schools implemented a comprehensive internal and external communications plan. Mid-way through the education campaign, the Board voted to **delay the election until Nov. 2008 and to increase the amount to \$370 million to include upgrades to technical education programs**. This action resulted in a revamping of the time line, creating a new "look" for promotional materials to differentiate them from earlier versions, and a concerted outreach to internal and external audiences.

Multiple communication channels were used

- **Print materials** - An extensive portfolio of education materials was produced by the Marketing department and included booklets, flyers, post cards, rack cards, buttons, posters, door hangers, banners.
- **Web** - A comprehensive bond info section was added to the district's website and included everything from voter registration forms to a complete explanation of intended improvements and financial accountability. Two-way communication was encouraged as Web visitors could send in questions. The district's internal portal site was also used to convey information, with links to the main web site.
- **Media production** - A video was created and shown repeatedly on our cable channel and burned into CDs for distribution and for use at speaking engagements. Celebrity endorsements were recorded and Parent Talk shows produced also for the **cable channel**. Scala messages were produced and aired on TV monitors at the district's School Service Center and in some high schools.
- **E-News** - Weekly articles appeared in the employee e-newsletter. All newsletter subscribers also received periodic news blasts concerning voter registration, facility updates and bond information. The superintendent utilized staff e-mail to send weekly "Did you know" messages about bond improvements and Parent Link, the automated phone system, was also used to engaged staff and parents.
- **Face-to-face (Internal)** - The Superintendent and BOE president met with coaches, fine arts and PE teachers to explain the proposed bond improvements and to encourage them to become bond-educators within their communities. The directors of athletics and fine arts identified coaches, parents and students to speak at televised BOE meetings. Presentations were made at in-service activities and during school staff meetings. Brownbag lunch presentations were held at the district's non-attendance support centers to ensure those employees were informed. Presentations were made to principals and district-level administrators at their monthly meetings; they were given tool kits to aid them in promoting education within their school communities. The on-going support given to principals led to their scheduling open houses, sharing bond education materials, encouraging voter registration, using marquees to promote the election, and contacting visible alumni advocates.
- **Face-to-face (External)** - Countless speaking engagements and dialog sessions were facilitated by district staff, BOE members and CARE members; including outreach to African American and Hispanic community leaders, foundation donors, the city's District Advisory Boards, neighborhood associations, clergy, and civic groups. Given the growing interest in technical education programs, tours were conducted to allow business leaders and elected officials of Wichita and its bedroom communities to see technical programs currently underway and to explain the need for more programs. Prominent CEOs were invited to a breakfast meeting at an elementary school slated for demolition and replacement; their feedback helped to frame future outreach to the business community.
- **Media relations** - The superintendent held a media briefing upon the BOE's vote to add a bond referendum to the ballot. He and the BOE president also met periodically with the newspaper's editorial staff to ensure they understood the bond plan and had accurate information (as opposed to the misinformation being aggressively distributed by anti-bond groups.). Both also wrote letters to the editor. Story ideas were constantly fed to the media, giving reporters fresh insight into school facility needs. Sports and fine arts reporters were targeted in addition to education reporters. Relationships were further strengthened with Hispanic and African American media.
- **Paid advertising** - Strategic placement of advertising in local newspapers and specialty publications complimented the substantial advertising funded by the CARE organization in newspapers, magazines, billboards and electronic media. The district and CARE both used direct mail to voters.
- **Student and volunteer networking** - CARE members, many of which were district employees, held athletic tail gate parties, Walk My Block and Take Five Partners initiatives. They put up yard signs, funded a website, linked to the district's site and developed/trained a speaker's bureau to give presentations. Members of the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council and the High School Leadership Team engaged in viral marketing to encourage their peers (of age) to vote. They were also trained and prepped to do media interviews and speaking engagements.
- **Mass-audience appeal** - Presentations or comments were made at all athletic events and fine arts concerts. For three weeks of football season, a different treat was given to spectators with wrappers to promote the election and bond. (Candy, gum and bottled water). A student pep rally was held on the eve of the election at our largest high school, with students, families, and staff from across the city.

Evaluation

- On Nov. 4, 2008, the Wichita Public Schools' \$370 million bond issue, the largest in state history, passed with 51% of the vote. This victory was despite the anti-bond forces efforts and their investment of \$208,797 in opposition. It also occurred as the country and city entered into the deepest recession in decades.
- Facilitated 68 speaking engagements to an estimated 2,000 people
- Active media relations program resulted in or influenced approximately 200 print, radio and TV stories that reached the entire Wichita Public Schools community.