

Gold Medallion Award Entry 2019

submitted by:

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Title of Entry: *HSSD Operational Referendum Campaign 2018*

Category: Bond/Finance Campaign

(Please also consider this entry for the Golden Achievement Award)

Number of Communications Staff: 1

HSSD is a public school district in suburban Green Bay, Wis. with one high school (9-12), one middle school (7-8), one intermediate school (5-6), and five elementary schools (K-4).

Enrollment in grades K-12 is 6,075.

Project Synopsis: HSSD Operational Referendum Campaign 2018

Overview:

From setback to comeback: the Howard-Suamico School District rebounded from a crushing referendum defeat in 2017 to pass a referendum by 17 percent in 2018. HSSD utilized staff and community surveys to inform campaign communications. A volunteer community task force, a majority of them “No” voters, studied school finance and informed planning for the 2018 campaign. Media relations were a centerpiece, culminating in a “Vote Yes” editorial written by the community newspaper editor following a month-long investigative reporting series. The communications plan was developed and executed by a one-person staff with support from a consultant for task force coordination and graphic design.

Following the April 2017 referendum loss, HSSD engaged Donovan Group as a partner in planning and executing the 2018 campaign. Research included a staff survey in April 2017 following the initial referendum and two community surveys in June 2017 and September 2017. A final staff survey followed the successful 2018 referendum. Findings from the survey data informed a shift in messaging, ballot language, tactical communications, and most importantly the Board’s formation of the Referendum question. The district engaged a Community Task Force of 20 volunteers to assess needs and recommend a course of action. The work of the Task Force informed strategic finance decisions, ballot language, and the campaign communications plan.

The two goals of the campaign were to rebuild trust and win support for the comeback referendum.

The operational referendum passed by a 58.6-41.4 margin. The 17-point victory, on the heels of a 41-point defeat the year prior, is among the 20 largest single-year turnarounds in Wisconsin referendum history, according to the Department of Public Instruction database of over 3,000 public school referenda.

In a post-referendum survey of staff, 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I trust the District’s leadership.”

The revenue limit override authority granted by the voters allowed HSSD to hire 30 new teachers, reduce class sizes, invest more than \$1 million in staff compensation, and address two years of deferred annual maintenance needs.

Target Audience(s): Staff, Residents, Media

Budget: \$15,000: \$10,000 task force consultant, graphic design; \$4,000 printing, postage; \$1,000 advertising, signage

Please visit the [linked Google Drive folder](#) for examples and details. Links to specific project elements are included in the campaign summary to follow.

The graphic is a vertical blue banner with white and orange text. At the top, it reads "HOWARD-SUAMICO SCHOOL DISTRICT REFERENDUM APRIL 3, 2018". Below this is a blue ballot box icon with a white checkmark inside an orange circle. The next line of text is "FIVE YEARS \$5.85 million per year". Below that are three blue arrows pointing right, each followed by a white text label: "Reduce class sizes", "Employee compensation", and "Facility maintenance". The next line of text is "Neutral property tax impact NO INCREASE". Below this is a blue arrow pointing down, followed by a white silhouette of three people running. At the bottom, the Howard-Suamico School District logo is displayed, which includes the text "HOWARD-SUAMICO SCHOOL DISTRICT" and the tagline "SERVING • LEARNING • ACHIEVING • TOGETHER".

Project Summary: HSSD Operational Referendum Campaign 2018 - Page 1 of 4

Research:

Less than one month after the failed 2017 referendum, we conducted a staff survey to identify perceived communication gaps. Survey analysis indicated the clear top response was the operational referendum's recurring request for funds, rather than a defined end date, with 142 responses.

Process/Outcomes	Referendum Question	Operations
Confusing explanation of what funds would be for / more specificity required	Recurring	New District Office has negative perception / needs to be addressed
General public not well enough informed	De-emphasize staff compensation	Technology overemphasis / overspending
Messaging not realistic, didn't emphasize needs, risk of loss (cuts)	Poor/unclear referendum question language	More budget info and transparency
Engage community more effectively and sooner	Split into multiple operational questions	Cut extracurriculars first (athletics, music, art)
Engage staff more effectively and sooner	Overreached	Increase fees
More mailings, more frequently	Past and ongoing tax impact not well understood	TLC overstaffed / overspending
Proposed positions unneeded, confusing, posted early why?	Emphasize specific maintenance needs	Facilities overspending
Communicate funding gap compared to local districts	No special election in the fall / Referendum fatigue	Orchestra room too advanced
Blue filer was ineffective / inadequate	Go back to Referendum again ASAP	New pool
Confront / Engage the "No" group directly	Ask for lower \$ amount per year	Cuts should have been based on one thing (seniority, performance)
Vote "No" Group made better late push than HSSD	First year tax increase was too much	Oppose cutting tech ed staff
Less social media	Next question needs to be zero tax increase	Implement teacher job-sharing
Communicate cuts publicly	Emphasize staff compensation	Have we fully explored cost savings on the utilities/operations side?
More media coverage / advertising		Cut Cash in Lieu
Specific pre-survey of voter tolerance for the plan	Administration	Change HSA funding
Negative public perception of teachers	Rebuild eroded trust with staff/community	Save LRPG Supervisor positions
Simplify and clarify tax impact	Not enough time for a good plan, rushed	
Share our story of being low-spending	Top heavy / too many DO positions	
Engage and highlight Alumni	Overpaid	
Enlist public help in advocacy effort	Work hard to maintain positivity. Morale is low	
More public tours / access to schools	Lack of presence in buildings	
Communicate advocacy steps publicly	Set up to fail intentionally	
Engage students	Appreciate end to "bidding war" practice	

HSSD Staff Post-Referendum Survey April 28 - May 1, 2017

A community-wide survey was deployed in June 2017 with 1,465 completed responses, a record-high response rate for a district-sponsored community survey. Highlighted findings from this survey included validated the staff feedback that the recurring nature or "open checkbook" of the referendum question was a primary concern. Also indicated was lack of clarity on what an operational referendum was and how funds were to be used. In terms of audience analysis, we also learned that a critically low percentage of non-staff residents supported the referendum, with only 35.44% of survey respondents indicating support.

The final survey was sent to staff and community in October 2017 as part of the work of the volunteer Community Task Force. A typical response rate for non-parent residents to district surveys is between 10-15% of the total number of responses. We were pleased to have 34.2% of the responses to this survey come from that key voter subgroup. The survey indicated 70.7% of respondents would definitely or probably support a 2018 referendum without any context or changes described. As we asked more specific questions to identify tax impact and length, we learned from the survey that critical elements of a new referendum question were: no or only slight tax increase and no reduction to student programs and services (76.6% support); a proposed tax increase ceiling of \$31 per year on \$100,000 of property value (77.7% support). Ultimately, the Task Force aligned its recommendation to the Board of Education with the survey findings.

See the [survey results and analysis folder](#) for more details.

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Analysis/Planning:

Communications planning was developed with Task Force engagement support from Donovan Group, a nationwide school communications firm specializing in referendum campaigns. The key strategic elements of the communications plan were aligned to the work of the Task Force, with each of the plan elements identified with one or more of the five key Task Force recommendations to the Board of Education.



Plan goals included:

- 1.) Provide consistent, timely, and accurate updates on the April 2018 referendum;
- 2.) Ensure transparency regarding planned expenditures of referendum funds; and
- 3.) Create communication opportunities that engage and invest HSSD stakeholders.

Measurable objectives included:

1. To build trust in District Leadership
 - a.) Hosted six public engagement sessions to share information and collect input from key stakeholders. More than 100 staff and residents attended in total;
 - b.) Facilitated print and broadcast media coverage to engage audience through trusted messengers;
 - c.) Created staff engagement opportunities including staff meetings, email, webcasts, and special info sessions;
 - d.) Utilized SchoolMessenger system and spring parent-teacher conferences to communicate directly with families. Board of Ed members and volunteers staffed info tables at all eight schools during conferences; and
 - e.) Conducted four stakeholder surveys.
2. To win support for the April 2018 referendum
 - a.) Launch multi-faceted initiative to communicate about the April 2018 referendum;
 - b.) Provide an accessible online resource for updates, reports, and to serve as an archive;
 - c.) Publish newsletter cover stories featuring referendum planning updates, mailed to all residents;
 - d.) Mail three additional informational brochures to all residents;
 - e.) Utilize social media platforms to communicate referendum facts and updates;
 - f.) Design and construct signs with key infographics for use in schools and at Board of Ed linkage meetings; and
 - g.) Analyze voter registration database.

The complete plan, including Task Force recommendations, target audiences, key messages, details regarding measurable objectives, and a communications calendar [is available to view here](#).

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Communication/Implementation:

The components of the plan are included in the links below with descriptions.

- **Task Force** - The Task Force was comprised of 20 community volunteers, meeting four times in the fall of 2017 to study school finance and ultimately submit a report of recommendations to the Board of Education and the public. [Its complete report is available here](#), which was compiled by HSSD staff in conjunction with the Donovan Group.
- **Banners and Graphics** - Posters and banners used for Board of Education community info sessions were created by a third-party graphic designer via Donovan Group and printed by HSSD. A related design was used for social media. [The graphics can be viewed here](#).
- **Mailers** - A key finding from the 2017 campaign was a lack of printed communication from the district in the community. We provided a long form mailer in January 2018 and three follow up postcards. The postcard content was informed by Q&A during the community info sessions. [All four print mailers can be viewed here](#).
- **Website** - While the full referendum website has now be archived, links to specific sections [are available here](#), along with a link to the current post-referendum information page.
- **Staff and Board of Education Presentations** - Two staff presentations and four planning reports to the Board of Education were submitted throughout the campaign. [Those presentation slide decks can be viewed here](#).
- **Media Coverage** - Campaign earned media coverage exceeded expectations ([view a summary here](#)), highlighted by three front-page, top fold stories in the Green Bay Press-Gazette and a four-part investigative series in HSSD's paper of record, The Press Times, culminating in a [Vote 'Yes' editorial](#) from the editor the week before the vote. The Press Times coverage won statewide recognition for local education coverage from the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.
- **Videos** - In addition to the referendum campaign budget, two videos were produced in support of [get-out-the-vote efforts](#), and marketing [open teaching positions](#) after the referendum passed.
- **Newsletters** - Our tri-annual [district newsletters](#) featured referendum-related cover stories.
- **Post-Referendum Communications** - Staff, parent, and community communication pieces after the successful referendum result included banners, email updates, newsletter articles, and website resources. [They are all viewable here](#).

The image displays a variety of campaign materials for the Howard-Suamico School District referendum. On the left, there is a vertical informational card with a list of community information sessions. In the center, a large poster features the text 'FIVE YEARS \$5.85 million per year' and lists key points: 'Reduce class sizes', 'Employee compensation', and 'Facility maintenance', all leading to a 'Neutral property tax impact NO INCREASE'. To the right of the poster is a smaller version of the same poster. Further right is a mailer titled 'The most frequently asked question during Referendum Community Information Sessions has been: "How does the District receive \$5.85 million for operations without the property tax rate going up?"'. Below this text is a bar chart titled 'Example Overall Mill Rate' showing data from 2017 to 2023. The chart has four categories: Operational (red), Existing Debt (blue), Five year referendum program (green), and Total (purple). The total mill rate remains relatively stable around 20.00 over the period. On the far right, there is a small box with the text 'NON-PROFIT ORG. U.S. POSTAGE PAID GREEN BAY, WI PERMIT #216'.

On Tuesday, April 3, 2018, voters in the Howard-Suamico School District will be asked to vote on an important referendum question.

Join the community conversation. Learn more by attending an information session.

- Thursday, February 15 • 6 p.m. Howard-Suamico School District Office 2706 Lineville Road
- Thursday, March 1 • 6 p.m. Howard-Suamico School District Office 2706 Lineville Road
- Friday, March 9 • 7 a.m. Coffee at Townline Pub & Grill 2544 Lineville Road
- Tuesday, March 13 • 6 p.m. Howard-Suamico School District Office 2706 Lineville Road
- Tuesday, March 27 • 6 p.m. Howard-Suamico School District Office 2706 Lineville Road
- Thursday, March 29 • 8 a.m. Coffee at Townline Pub & Grill 2544 Lineville Road

HOWARD-SUAMICO SCHOOL DISTRICT REFERENDUM APRIL 3, 2018

FIVE YEARS \$5.85 million per year

- Reduce class sizes
- Employee compensation
- Facility maintenance

Neutral property tax impact **NO INCREASE**

NON-PROFIT ORG. U.S. POSTAGE PAID GREEN BAY, WI PERMIT #216

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The most frequently asked question during Referendum Community Information Sessions has been: "How does the District receive \$5.85 million for operations without the property tax rate going up?"

Each year the HSSD tax levy is comprised of funds for District operations (shown below in red) and debt (shown below in blue). The Board of Education has maintained a commitment to aggressive debt retirement. Starting in 2019, District debt payments are scheduled to decrease significantly. See the reverse side of this card for a closer look.

Example Overall Mill Rate

Year	Operational	Existing Debt	Five year referendum program	Total
2017	18.00	2.00	0.00	20.00
2018	18.00	2.00	0.00	20.00
2019	18.00	1.50	0.50	20.00
2020	18.00	1.00	1.00	20.00
2021	18.00	0.50	1.50	20.00
2022	18.00	0.00	2.00	20.00
2023	18.00	0.00	2.00	20.00

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Evaluation:

The clearest measure of success for a referendum campaign is the result at the polls. The 2018 HSSD operational referendum passed by a 58.6-41.4 margin. The 17-point victory, on the heels of a 41-point defeat the year prior, is among the 20 largest single-year turnarounds in state referendum history, according to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction database of over 3,000 public school referenda. The project met the goal of securing relief from the state-imposed revenue cap and saved the district from further staffing and programming cuts. It exceeded goals in terms of margin of victory with more than a double-digit win, a landslide in political terms. [Click here to access supporting documentation for the campaign](#), including specific elements linked in responses above and other items.

Key takeaways from the campaign include:

- Valued engagement with public school referendum specialist, Donovan Group, to develop campaign strategy;
- Cost savings of printing 3 of 4 mailers and all banners in-house, total campaign budget (not including separately-funded videos) was \$15,000; printing vendor costs could have doubled the budget;
- Successful implementation of Task Force community engagement model, which also supported future recruitment efforts for the Education Foundation and Board of Education;
- Timely use of internal and external surveys provided quantitative support for data-based decision-making; and
- Support from the Policy Governance model of the HSSD Board of Education allowed administration to be agile and responsive to community resident concerns during the campaign.

Next steps include:

- Adoption of the Task Force model for our funding renewal campaign in five years. The Future Facilities 2035 Task Force is forming and beginning its work;
- Development of a new annual publication, *Report to Our Community*, to better engage in the crucial conversation on school funding inequity in Wisconsin ahead of the next referendum; and
- In response to community feedback, improving coordination with the Howard-Suamico Education Foundation on classroom level and district wide grants and fundraising through partnerships with DonorsChoose and local businesses as an interim step before the next referendum campaign to demonstrate stewardship and forward-thinking action.

