



SARASOTA COUNTY SCHOOLS MILLAGE REFERENDUM

NSPRA GOLD MEDALLION AWARD ENTRY

BOND/FINANCE CAMPAIGN FOR SARASOTA COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Your Schools. Your Future. Your Vote.

ENTRANT INFORMATION

Florida Public School District

- Communications Team of 11
- 5,700+ Employees
- 57 Schools

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SYNOPSIS

Since 2002, Sarasota County Schools' voter-approved Millage Referendum has provided essential funding to enhance student achievement, support educator quality, enrich learning experiences, elevate workforce education, and ensure school safety. In 2024, the district launched "Your Schools, Your Future, Your Vote" (#YourSchoolsYourFuture)—a comprehensive public awareness campaign—to educate the community about the referendum renewal set for the November 5, 2024, ballot.

This referendum continues the \$1 mill per year ad valorem tax, ensuring a projected \$114 million in annual revenue from 2026-2030 without increasing taxes. These funds support competitive teacher salaries, additional instruction time, workforce training, the arts, STEM, school safety, and more.

Using a four-step strategic public relations planning process (RPIE), the campaign:

- Researched historical data, voter sentiment, and legislative guidelines
- Planned a multi-channel engagement strategy with key messages, infographics, digital toolkits, community engagement, and outreach materials
- Implemented a mix of social media, traditional and digital media campaigns, public forums, and media relations
- Evaluated success through community participation, engagement analytics, and, ultimately, an overwhelming voter approval rate of 84.06%—the highest in Florida.

With a dedicated website, digital toolkit, social media graphics, email alerts, digital marquees, information cards, and presentations, the campaign ensured voters understood the referendum's direct impact on students and schools. By leveraging community partnerships, transparency, and compelling storytelling, Sarasota County Schools mobilized strong public support, reinforcing the district's reputation for educational excellence and fiscal responsibility.

RESEARCH

The campaign was founded on comprehensive research utilizing formal and informal primary and secondary methods. Sarasota County Schools:

- Reviewed historical voting trends from previous referendums and analyzed Sarasota County election data to refine target outreach efforts.
- Partnered with the district's legal counsel to review Florida statutes impacting district millage elections, including FS [1011.73](#), FS [97.021](#), FS [104.31](#), FS [106.113](#) and FS [106.15](#).
- Examined voter turnout demographics to identify key audiences, including parents, retirees, and new voters.

- Conducted comparative studies of similar Florida school referendums to identify best practices and effective messaging strategies.
- Engaged directly with school staff, educators, and administrators to gauge their perspectives on funding priorities and community concerns.
- Consulted district financial data to communicate how the funds would be allocated and their impact on student success.
- Pretested campaign messaging, with a focus on tagline and hashtag, to ensure clarity and resonance with different voter segments.

Findings highlighted:

- Strong overall support for school funding but a need for increased transparency on financial accountability and tangible student benefits.
- A preference for concise, easy-to-understand communication about tax impact and educational outcomes for internal and external audiences.
- The effectiveness of digital and social media in reaching younger and middle-aged voters, while traditional media remained critical for older populations.
- The necessity of engaging community partners, including business leaders and civic organizations, to build widespread support.

The research insights directly shaped the messaging, engagement strategy, and communication tactics used throughout the campaign to maximize voter awareness and participation.

PLANNING



Using research insights, we crafted a targeted, multi-channel communications strategy to maximize voter awareness and engagement.

Strategic Considerations:

- Florida statutes have changed since the last referendum campaign, now requiring all school district referendums to be held during a general election rather than a special election. As a result, significantly higher voter turnout was expected, necessitating thorough analysis and research by the communications team to effectively engage a broader and more diverse stakeholder group.
- The existing 1-mill per year ad valorem tax had been approved in the 2024 vote and remained in effect until 2026. This referendum sought to extend the tax from 2026 through 2030. We had to anticipate and address potential voter confusion, ensuring clarity that the proposed tax was a continuation and would not take effect for another two years.

- Targeted outreach strategies were developed based on voter trend analysis, with a focus on engaging parents, retirees, and high-turnout voter groups.
- Messaging was pretested internally and with PAC to ensure clarity and resonance.

Messaging Strategy:

- **Slogan:** “Your Schools, Your Future, Your Vote”
- **Hashtag:** #YourSchoolsYourFuture
- **Core Messages:**
 - The referendum does not raise taxes.
 - It provides \$114 million annually for SCS students.
 - Funds support teacher retention, instructional time, career and technical education, STEM, arts, and school safety.
 - Community oversight ensures accountability.

Content Development:

- **Website:** Central hub with FAQs, financial breakdowns, and downloadable resources.
- **Infographics & Videos:** Clear, engaging content highlighting student impact.
- **Printed Materials:** Information cards and banners.
- **Digital Toolkit:** Ready-to-use graphics and messaging for staff and community partners.
- **Talking Points & Presentations:** Used for community meetings and staff advocacy.
- **Other Digital Touchpoints:** Digital marquee graphics at district and schools, jumbotron graphics at high school football games, and LED scoretable graphics for other high school gyms.

Engagement Plan:

- **Community Forums:** Six public events at high schools to provide transparency and encourage voter participation.
- **Email & Text Alerts:** Sent at key moments to drive turnout and keep stakeholders informed.
- **School & Business Partnerships:** Distributed materials through 40+ community locations, ensuring widespread reach.
- **Media Relations:** Press releases, editorial features, and interviews with key stakeholders to enhance credibility and visibility.
- **School Social Media:** Published social media posts on all official school social media accounts.

Training and Internal Communications:

- A FAQ document was developed for school principals and administrators to ensure they were prepared to answer common community questions.
- Administrators and Principals received training on referendum messaging at leadership meetings.
- Staff were engaged as key ambassadors to disseminate accurate, unbiased information and drive voter participation.

IMPLEMENTATION



The campaign launched in July 2024, ensuring consistent messaging and widespread community engagement.

Communication Strategies:

- Provide clear, consistent messaging across all platforms.
- Engage all registered voters a minimum of three times through multiple communication channels.
- Engage parents and staff a minimum of five times, leveraging both district and school-level communications.
- Focus on direct community engagement, prioritizing face-to-face meetings and forums.
- Maintain saturation and repetition of key messages across platforms.

Digital & Print Communications:

- Website banner, homepage tile, and designated landing page on the district's website.
- 201 graphics created for social media, website, and marquees.
- 10,000 information cards distributed to schools, SCS district offices, and community hubs.

Community Events & Outreach:

- Six Public Forums at high schools (Aug–Oct 2024).
- Presentations to local organizations, PTAs, and business groups.
- Inclusion in the “Back2School” guide and district communications.

Social Media & Digital Marketing:

- Targeted posts and explainer videos shared across platforms.
- Direct outreach via text and email alerts.
- Organic digital ads to increase reach and engagement.

Direct Voter Contact:

- Text & email alerts sent regarding community forums on key dates.
- Forum reminders sent to 5,000-10,000+ recipients per event.

Strategic Response to Opposition:

- Monitoring of misinformation and correction of inaccuracies when necessary.
- Avoiding engagement with known opposition groups while reinforcing positive messaging.
- Ensuring ambassadors remained focused on factual, research-backed communication.

Transparency & Accountability:

- Financial Advisory Committee oversight ensured responsible fund use.

EVALUATION



The campaign successfully mobilized voter support, resulting in an 84.06% approval rate—the highest in Florida for school referendums.

Key Success Metrics:

- **Overwhelming approval rate:** 84.06% Yes (213,677 votes) and 16% No (40,572 votes)
- **High Engagement:** 201 social media and website graphics generated strong digital interactions.
- **Event Attendance:** Community members and stakeholders attended public forums, resulting in meaningful conversations and invaluable insights.
- **Broad Outreach:** Over 40 community locations distributed materials.
- **Effective Messaging:** FAQs, presentations, and infographics addressed public concerns.
- **Record Voter Turnout & Approval:** Secured overwhelming community endorsement.

Post-Campaign Survey & Community Feedback:

Following the election, the communications team conducted an internal review and gathered feedback to assess the effectiveness of the communication strategy. Key takeaways included:

- **Widespread Awareness:** A majority of stakeholders were aware of the referendum and cited district communications as a primary source of information.
- **Clarity of Messaging:** The campaign's emphasis on transparency and taxpayer impact helped build trust and understanding among voters. A conscious play on words by using "your" in the slogan to make it personal to the voter.
- **Preferred Communication Channels:** Social media and community meetings were the most effective platforms for engagement.
- **Staff & Community Involvement:** Educators, school leaders, and community partners played a crucial role in disseminating accurate information and addressing voter questions.
- **Special Note:** Information card distribution to schools and community sites was essential in reaching the older population that does not utilize digital platforms.

Measurable Objectives & Results:

- **Develop voter confidence in the referendum's benefits.**
 - **Accomplished:** High voter approval of 84.06% demonstrated strong community support.
- **Ensure that stakeholders clearly understood the referendum's purpose.**
 - **Accomplished:** Consistent messaging across multiple platforms reinforced understanding and minimized misinformation.
- **Engage the community through diverse outreach efforts.**
 - **Accomplished:** Social media, public forums, and traditional media reached a broad audience, ensuring inclusivity.
- **Encourage voter participation.**
 - **Accomplished:** The campaign contributed to strong voter turnout, reinforcing community investment in local education.

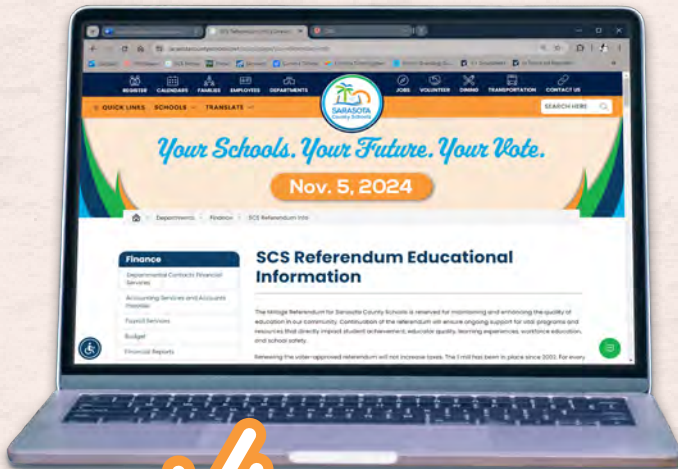
The campaign's success reinforced Sarasota County Schools' commitment to transparent communication, community involvement, and student-centered decision-making. The referendum renewal ensures continued investment in quality education, benefiting students, educators, and the broader community for years to come.



Homepage Banner:

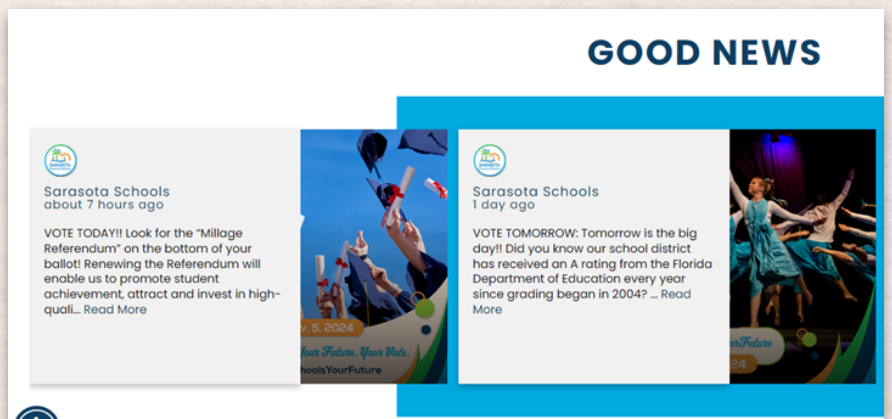


Referendum Web Page:



District Website
“Good News”
section that features
social media posts

Homepage Tile:



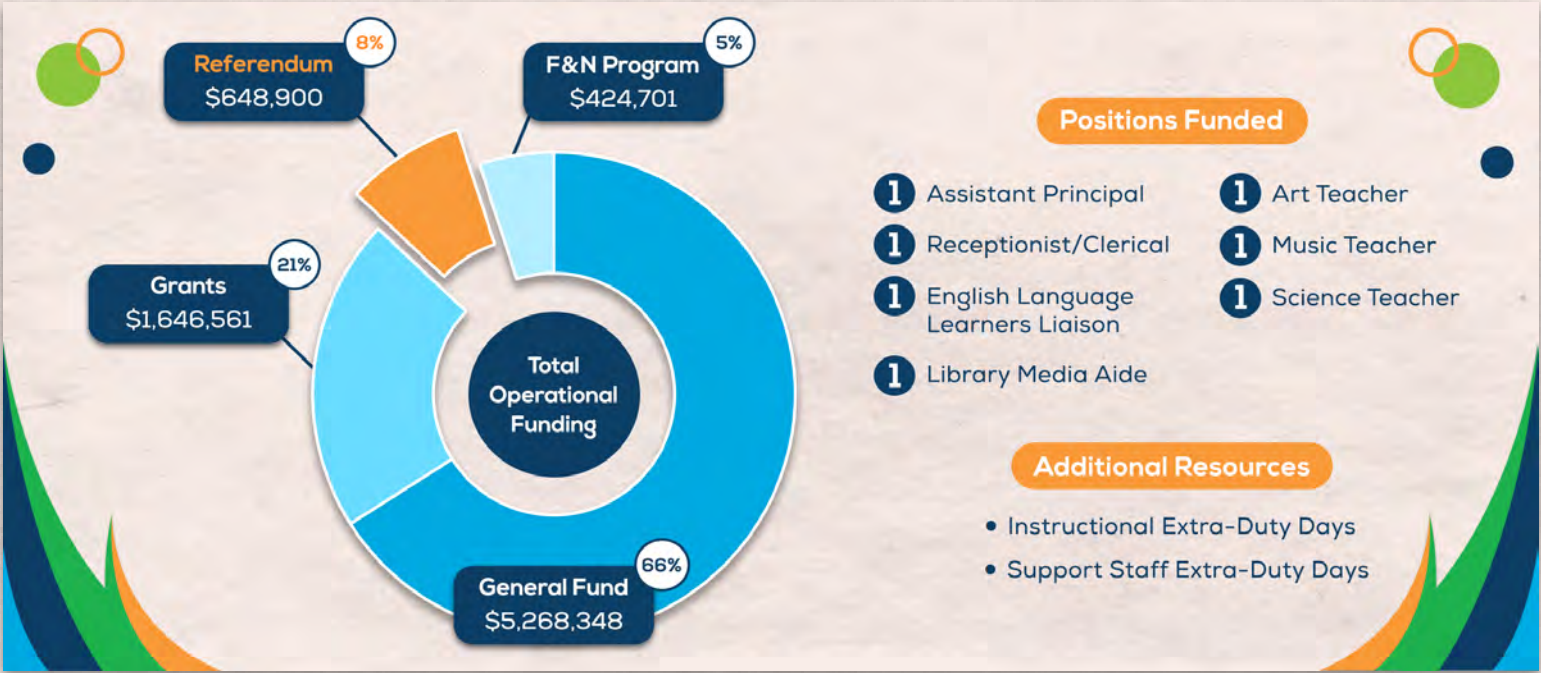


FUNDING ALLOCATION HOMEPAGE BANNERS FOR EACH SCHOOL

Banner 1 - Overall Funding:



Banner 2 - Specific Allocations of Funds:





Front of Information Card

SARASOTA COUNTY SCHOOLS MILLAGE REFERENDUM

*Your Schools.
Your Future.
Your Vote.*

Nov. 5, 2024

Voters must register by October 7, 2024* to be eligible to vote on November 5, 2024

* For information about online registration, early voting and voting by mail, visit SarasotaVotes.gov or call (941) 861-8600




Back of Information Card

SARASOTA COUNTY SCHOOLS MILLAGE REFERENDUM

Nov. 5, 2024

Continuing the Millage Referendum will enable us to:


- Promote Student Achievement**
 Investing \$33 million to provide resources and support systems that enhance student learning and academic success.
- Elevate Workforce Education**
 Investing \$17 million in career and technical education programs, preparing students for success in the modern workforce.
- Attract & Invest in High-Quality Educators & Staff**
 Allocating \$28 million to recruit and retain talented educators, providing ongoing professional growth and support.
- Enrich Learning Experiences**
 Utilizing \$22 million to expand access for educational opportunities, including early learning, arts and music, STEM, and extracurricular activities.
- Additional Instruction Time**
 Continuing the additional 30 minutes of instruction per school day, equaling to 18 extra days a year.
- Ensure Safe & Secure Schools**
 Allocating \$14 million to enhance safety measures by providing funding for Security Aides, Counselors, and Behavioral Specialists.

The Millage Referendum for Sarasota County Schools is reserved for maintaining and enhancing the quality of education in our community.

Continuation of the referendum will support ongoing programs and resources that directly impact student achievement, educator quality, learning experiences, workforce education, and school safety.

The 1 mill has been in place since 2002 and renewing the referendum will NOT increase the current tax base.

All information on this postcard is provided for educational purposes only.



To learn more about the Millage Referendum for Sarasota County Schools, scan the QR code or visit www.SarasotaCountySchools.net/Referendum

Preview Graphic for Website:



SARASOTA
COUNTY SCHOOLS

REFERENDUM 2026-2030

For 20 years, every dollar has been
used right here in our schools



Attracting and
Investing in High-
Quality Educators
and Staff

\$28M
average annually

Workforce
Education and
Training

\$17M
average annually

Ensuring Safe and
Secure Schools

\$14M
average annually

Enriching Learning
Experiences

\$28M
average annually

Promoting Student
Achievement

\$33M
average annually

Front of Poster:



SARASOTA
COUNTY SCHOOLS

REFERENDUM 2026-2030

For 20 years, every dollar has been
used right here in our schools



Attracting and Investing in
High-Quality Educators

\$28M
average annually

We are dedicated to attracting and valuing exceptional teachers and staff committed to providing our students with the highest quality education possible.



Workforce Education and
Training

\$17M
average annually

We are enhancing initiatives that foster skill development, practical application, and expertise, including vocational training, technical education, apprenticeship, and career readiness programs.



Ensuring Safe and
Supportive Schools

\$14M
average annually

We are reinforcing the commitment to creating physically safe learning environments supporting our students' well-being and ability to learn and thrive.



Enriching Learning Experiences

\$28M
average annually

We are preserving and supporting programs that promote creativity, innovation, and knowledge in various fields, such as arts, music, technology, science, and library media.



Promoting Student Success

\$33M
average annually

We are focused on the goal of education, which is to foster successful outcomes for students both academically and in their future endeavors through investment in evidence-based instructional approaches.





EVERY STUDENT. EVERY DAY!

Back of Poster:



SARASOTA
COUNTY SCHOOLS

REFERENDUM 2026-2030

For 20 years, every dollar has been
used right here in our schools



Attracting & Investing in
High-Quality Educators & Staff

2026-27	\$27M
2027-28	\$27M
2028-29	\$28M
2029-30	\$30M

Priorities:

- Competitive Salary Enhancements
- Recruitment & Retention Efforts
- Extended School Day

Workforce Education and
Training

2026-27	\$17M
2027-28	\$17M
2028-29	\$18M
2029-30	\$18M

Priorities:

- Career Technical Education
- Career Exploration Pathways
- Internships / Apprenticeships
- Career Advisors

Ensuring Safe and Secure
Schools

2026-27	\$13M
2027-28	\$14M
2028-29	\$14M
2029-30	\$15M

Priorities:

- Security Aides
- School Counselors
- Behavior Specialists
- Additional Administrative Support
- Additional Support Staff

Enriching Learning Experiences

2026-27	\$21M
2027-28	\$21M
2028-29	\$22M
2029-30	\$23M

Priorities:

- Pre-K / Early Learning Programs
- Art & Music Teachers
- Media Center Aides
- Accelerated Coursework
- STEM

Promoting Student
Achievement

2026-27	\$32M
2027-28	\$32M
2028-29	\$33M
2029-30	\$34M

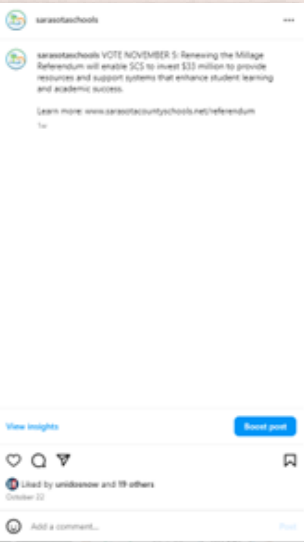
Priorities:

- Literacy Coaches & Intervention Teachers
- English Language Learner Support
- Elementary Enrichment Science Teachers
- Data Coaches & Technology Support
- Summer Learning Academies
- School Choice Offerings, including Charters




Your Schools. Your Future. Your Vote.

SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS (DISTRICT)




SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS (SCHOOL)



Alta Vista Elementary School
2 days ago

VOTE NOVEMBER 5: Renewing the Millage Referendum will enable SCS to allocate \$14 million to implement safety measures and enhance campus security and funds Security Aides, Counselors, and Behavioral Specialists positions.

Learn more: www.sarasotacountyschools.net/referendum



#YourSchoolsYourFuture

Nov. 5, 2024

Like

Comment

Share

Comment as Sarasota County Schools



North Port High School
7 hours ago

VOTE TODAY!!! Look for the "Millage Referendum" on the bottom of your ballot! Renewing the Referendum will enable us to promote student achievement, attract and invest in high-quality educators, enrich learning experiences, elevate workforce education, and ensure safe and secure schools.

#YourSchoolsYourFuture



Nov. 5, 2024

Your Schools. Your Future. Your Vote.

#YourSchoolsYourFuture

Like

Comment

Share

Comment as Sarasota County Schools



Pine View School for the Gifted
August 26

This November, Sarasota County residents will see the "Millage Referendum" on the ballot. The Millage Referendum for Sarasota County Schools is reserved for maintaining and enhancing the quality of education in our community. Continuation of the referendum will ensure ongoing support for vital programs and resources that directly impact student achievement, educator quality, learning experiences, workforce education, and school safety. #YourSchoolsYourFuture

Learn more: www.sarasotacountyschools.net/referendum



#YourSchoolsYourFuture

Nov. 5, 2024

Like

Comment

Share

Comment as Sarasota County Schools



Venice Middle School
August 26

This November, Sarasota County residents will see the "Millage Referendum" on the ballot. The Millage Referendum for Sarasota County Schools is reserved for maintaining and enhancing the quality of education in our community. Continuation of the referendum will ensure ongoing support for vital programs and resources that directly impact student achievement, educator quality, learning experiences, workforce education, and school safety. #YourSchoolsYourFuture

Learn more: www.sarasotacountyschools.net/referendum



Nov. 5, 2024

Your Schools. Your Future. Your Vote.

#YourSchoolsYourFuture

Like

Comment

Share

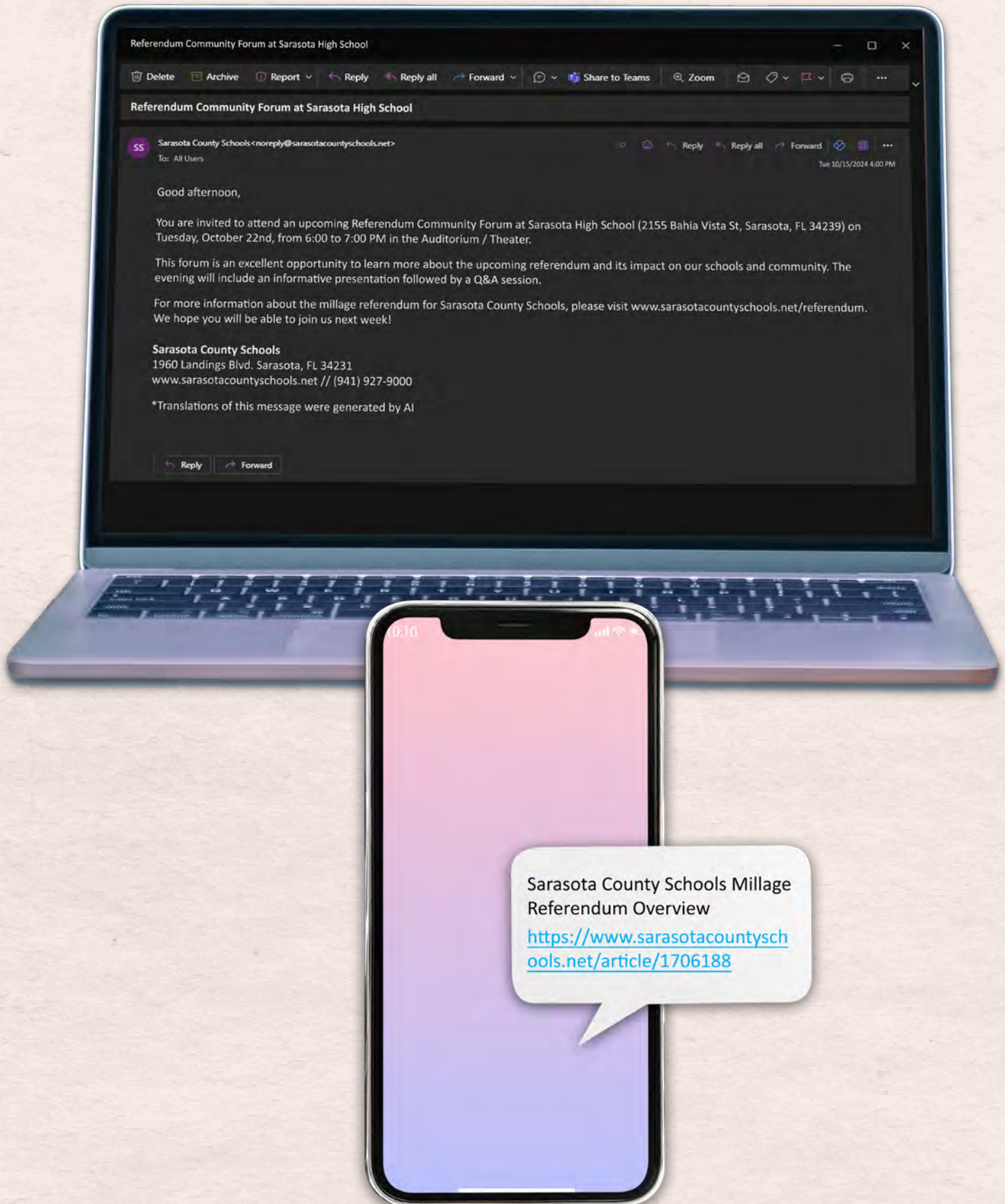
Comment as Sarasota County Schools

Referendum Video:



Referendum Podcast Episode:









Community Forum Social Graphics:



Other Referendum Social Graphics:



Referendum Graphic on School’s Football Field Jumbotron:



Referendum Graphic for School’s LED Scoretable:



