

#ChooseDASD Campaign

NSPRA Gold Medallion Entry
Special Communication Project/Campaign



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Communications Department Structure

Two Full-Time Communications Staff Members
One 0.2 Communications Support Staff Members

Public School District
Approximately 13,000 Students

Synopsis

Within the first year of implementation, the #ChooseDASD campaign helped return 127 students to DASD schools, retaining approximately \$2.25 million in funding for district classrooms.

Downingtown Area School District (DASD) is the sixth-largest school district in Pennsylvania, serving more than 13,000 students and employing approximately 1,800 staff members.

During the early stages of the 2025-26 budget planning process, DASD faced a significant projected deficit driven by declining commercial tax revenue and rapidly rising special education, healthcare, transportation, and charter school tuition costs. Under Pennsylvania law, school districts are required to pay tuition for resident students who attend charter schools, often at a cost that exceeds the district's per-pupil expense to educate students in its own classrooms.

District leadership was challenged to identify creative solutions that would allow DASD to continue providing exceptional educational opportunities for students while avoiding employee furloughs.

In response, the #ChooseDASD Campaign was developed as a strategic, relationship-centered initiative designed to inform families, strengthen community trust, and encourage district enrollment.

The campaign employed a two-pronged strategy:

1. Community Awareness Campaign

Proactively sharing information about the value, opportunities, and outcomes of a DASD education, while explaining the financial impact of charter enrollment on local taxpayers.

2. Targeted Family Outreach

Direct engagement with families whose children were enrolled in charter schools, providing personalized information, school tours, and enrollment support to help them explore returning to their neighborhood schools.

The ultimate goal of the campaign was to ensure that local taxpayer dollars remain invested in DASD classrooms while welcoming students back to the programs, opportunities, and community connections offered within DASD schools.

Through strategic communication, data-driven messaging, and relationship-based outreach, the #ChooseDASD Campaign successfully positioned DASD as the school of choice for families across the community.

Research

Financial | Quantitative

To better understand the scope of the issue, the DASD Communications Department partnered with the district's Business Office to analyze the financial impact of charter school enrollment on the district budget. This collaboration helped ensure that the campaign would be grounded in accurate data and clearly communicate the fiscal realities to the community.

2024-25 Data



428

DASD-resident students enrolled in charter schools



\$3,400

Per-Student additional operational cost to DASD for each charter student

This analysis revealed that charter enrollment represented both a financial challenge and a strategic opportunity: increasing DASD enrollment would simultaneously strengthen district finances and expand access to district programs for local families.

2024-25 Average Per Pupil Costs

Charter School Tuition **\$17,990**

DASD Tuition **- \$14,685**

Extra Tuition Paid Per Charter Student **\$3,305**

Additional charter costs **+ \$3,400**

Net funds lost for each DASD student enrolled in a charter school **\$6,705**



Understanding the Community Perspective | Qualitative

The district conducted direct outreach to all 428 charter school families through email and phone communications. These conversations revealed that many families were unaware of the financial impact of charter enrollment on DASD. Many families believed charter schools were "free," unaware that tuition payments are funded by local taxpayers and often exceed the district's own per-pupil instructional costs.

Additional follow-up during joint home and school association leadership meetings confirmed that the broader DASD community lacked a comprehensive understanding of charter school funding and its implications for district classrooms.

Digital Learning Considerations | Qualitative

Although the COVID-19 pandemic made many families aware that DASD offers a cyber option through the Downingtown Cyber Academy, the district had intentionally scaled back promotion of the program. This decision reflected the polarization surrounding online education during the pandemic years, as district leadership sought to balance community needs while maintaining focus on in-person learning opportunities.

As part of the #ChooseDASD campaign, the district strategically reintroduced awareness of the Downingtown Cyber Academy as a high-quality online option for families seeking flexibility without leaving the district.

Academic Outcomes and Student Experience | Quantitative

To guide the #ChooseDASD campaign and provide families with clear information, the district collected and analyzed a variety of data comparing DASD schools and charter schools, including student achievement ([Math](#), [ELA](#)), staffing qualifications, and opportunities available to students.

This research ensured that the campaign's messaging was factual, credible, and directly addressed community questions about academics, programs, and student experiences.

Additional Impact: Full-Day Kindergarten Quantitative & Qualitative

Prior to the 2025–26 school year, DASD did not offer district-wide full-day kindergarten.

Community feedback through interviews, board comment and email over several years indicated that the high cost of childcare in the area was a barrier for some families, particularly when local charter schools offered full-day kindergarten at no additional expense.

Analysis of enrollment data reinforced this feedback, revealing a continued trend of new student enrollments in first and second grades, suggesting that families were delaying entry into DASD until full-day instructional options became available.



Research Findings Summary

These research findings revealed three key challenges:

- Limited community awareness of charter funding
- Misconceptions about the value of DASD programs, and
- Barriers that prevented families from considering a return to district schools.

Based on these insights, the district designed the #ChooseDASD campaign to focus on three strategic objectives: increasing community understanding about charter funding, strengthening awareness around district programs, and building direct relationships with families currently enrolled in charter schools to encourage a return to DASD.

Planning

Problem Statement

Downingtown Area School District faced increasing financial pressure due, in part, to rising charter school tuition costs. Under Pennsylvania law, the district must pay tuition for resident students attending charter schools—costing DASD an average of \$6,705 more per student than educating those students within district classrooms and redirecting millions of local taxpayer dollars away from DASD schools. Research revealed that many families were unaware of the financial impact of charter enrollment and the academic opportunities available in DASD, creating a need for a strategic communication initiative to increase awareness, strengthen trust, and encourage families to choose DASD schools.

Goal

Increase awareness and enrollment by ensuring families understand the unique opportunities, strong academic outcomes, and enriching student experiences offered by Downingtown Area School District. By showcasing DASD as the school of choice, the campaign aimed to encourage charter-enrolled families to return, strengthen community trust, and ensure local taxpayer dollars remain invested in DASD classrooms, ultimately inspiring families to #ChooseDASD.

Objectives

Reduce charter enrollment by at least 50 students during the 2025–26 enrollment cycle through re-enrollment of DASD-resident students

Strengthen awareness of DASD’s academic performance, student supports, and expanded programming options

Increase community understanding of the financial impact of charter enrollment on local taxpayers to create community advocacy on behalf of the district

Approach

A key principle guiding district leadership throughout the #ChooseDASD campaign was to avoid criticizing or disparaging charter schools.

Instead, the focus remained squarely on highlighting the strengths, opportunities, and unique advantages of a DASD education.

By showcasing why DASD is the school of choice—through academics, programs, and student experiences—the campaign reinforced community trust while presenting families with a positive, informative alternative to charter enrollment.

Target Audiences

- Families with DASD-resident students currently enrolled in charter schools
- Families with students currently enrolled in DASD schools
- DASD staff
- DASD community at large
- Families considering unenrolling in a DASD school



Roles & Responsibilities

The #ChooseDASD campaign relied on a cross-departmental leadership team that combined strategic communications, district leadership, and direct family engagement.

Superintendent - Provide overall leadership and strategic direction for the campaign. Approve campaign objectives, messaging, and resource allocation to ensure alignment with district priorities. Serve as the public face of the initiative through key communications and community engagements, reinforcing the campaign message and building community trust.

Communications Department (Comms)- Partner with the Director of Student Relations and School Climate to design and implement the campaign strategy. Develop messaging and materials distributed across multiple channels, including digital, print, and community outreach platforms. Track campaign metrics, evaluate effectiveness, and refine strategies throughout the campaign. Support outreach initiatives by providing communication tools and messaging to district leaders and schools.

Director of Student Relations and School Climate (SRSC) - Lead direct engagement with families and coordinate outreach across schools. Work closely with principals and staff to connect with charter-enrolled families through phone calls, home visits, open houses, and school tours. Address family questions and concerns, provide information about district programs and enrollment options, and coordinate follow-up communication to support re-enrollment. Monitor enrollment trends and gather family feedback to inform ongoing campaign adjustments.

Messaging



Academic Excellence

DASD students outperform statewide charter schools by 44% in math and 37% in ELA.



Student Experience

97% of students report feeling safe at school.
92% say their teachers care about them.



Flexible Options

Downingtown Cyber Academy provides a flexible online program with 100% state-certified teachers.



Community Investment

Charter enrollment shifts taxpayer funding away from DASD classrooms.



Hashtags

#ChooseDASD, #InformedAtDASD, #DASDproud, #publicschoolsweek (Feb 23-27)

Strategies

Direct, Personalized Family Outreach – The district prioritized personal relationships and individualized engagement with families whose children were enrolled in charter schools.

Visibility, Marketing & Public Awareness – Tactics reinforced district pride, academic excellence and student opportunities across multiple communication channels.

Implementation

Strategy #1

Direct, Personalized Family Outreach

Target Audience - Families with DASD-resident students currently enrolled in charter schools, Families considering unenrolling in a DASD school

Tactics

Personalized Phone Calls & Home Visits	Utilizing strategic talking points, district administrators and school leaders made direct, heartfelt phone calls (or home visits as necessary) to families enrolled in charter schools.	SRSC
Personalized Emails	Communications timed with the announcements of legislative reform to cyber charter school funding and the subsequent staff losses at two large cyber schools.	Comms/ SRSC
Postcards	Mailed to all current charter families in DASD	Comms
Open House Events & One-on-One School Tours	Schools hosted open house nights where families toured facilities, met teachers and administrators, and observed improvements firsthand. Private tours were offered to families seeking a more personalized experience.	Principals
Childcare Incentives	To remove a common barrier to enrollment for working families, qualifying families were offered Before and After Care scholarships to ease the transition back to DASD schools.	SRSC
Welcome Back Package	Returning students received a welcome package that included DASD-branded items and school supply starter kits to create excitement and ease transition.	Principals
Pre-Exit Interviews	When a family initiates withdrawal from a DASD school, the Director of Student Relations and School Climate follows up with a personal phone call to listen to the family's concerns, provide information about district programs and recent improvements, and explore ways to support the student's continued enrollment in DASD.	SRSC

Strategy #2

Visibility, Marketing & Public Awareness

Target Audiences - Families with students currently enrolled in DASD schools, DASD staff, DASD community at large, Families with DASD students currently enrolled in charter schools

Tactics - All completed by Comms

Targeted Social Media Campaign	DASD Student-Focused Videos
Press Release	Informational & Check-In Emails
Print Materials	Recruitment Website
Digital Billboards	Board Meeting / Home & School Presentations

Evaluation

Objective	Results
Reduce charter enrollment by at least 50 students during the 2025–26 enrollment cycle through re-enrollment of DASD-resident students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 127 former charter students re-enrolled in DASD (30% decrease) • \$2.25 million retained in DASD classrooms for the 2025–26 school year • Kindergarten charter enrollment dropped from 82 students in 2024–25 to 13 in 2025–26
Strengthen awareness of DASD’s academic performance, student supports, and expanded programming options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media campaign received 78,358 views and 5,833 engagements • 856 attendees at Open Houses
Increase community understanding of the financial impact of charter enrollment on local taxpayers to create community advocacy on behalf of the district.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dozens of emails from current DASD families appreciating explanation & supporting efforts • Media social page posts of release include 159 engagements • DASD has been contacted by four PA districts to request our blueprint for bringing charter families back to district schools • 93.5% of DASD families reported being highly likely to recommend their child’s school to others on this year’s school climate survey

Impact

The #ChooseDASD campaign demonstrated that strategic, personalized communication that is grounded in research, transparency, and community trust can directly influence enrollment decisions and strengthen public investment in local schools.

#ChooseDASD was not simply a communications initiative; it produced measurable fiscal impact, strengthened school climate, and reaffirmed DASD as the school of choice for families in our community.

Lessons Learned

The #ChooseDASD campaign reinforced several key lessons for district communications and enrollment strategies:

- Personal relationships matter. Direct conversations with families were the most effective method of rebuilding trust and encouraging reconsideration of district schools.
- Transparency builds credibility. Clearly explaining how charter tuition affects local school funding helped increase community understanding and support.
- Positive messaging is essential. By focusing on the strengths of DASD schools rather than criticizing charter schools, the campaign strengthened community trust and maintained constructive dialogue with families.

Next Steps

- Continue and expand upon current tactics
- Further research and data evaluation related to unenrollment to inform future tactics
- Testimonial videos of students who have returned to DASD
- Collaborative investigation into specialized programming opportunities (i.e. Dance, Scholars)

Supplemental Materials

DASD Student-Focused Videos

- [I Am Downingtown](#)
- [Choose Downingtown Area School District](#)
- [A Day in the Life of a DASD Kindergartner](#)
- [Kindergarten Testimonials](#)

Press Release

- [Daily Local News](#)
- [MyChesCo](#)
- [PA Principals Association](#)

Informational & Check-In Emails

- [Email to current DASD families](#)
- [Email to DASD staff](#)
- [Email to former charter families who had already made the switch to DASD](#) - to provide a sense of caring and obtain testimonials for website and press release

Print Materials

- [Open House](#) and [Full-Day Kindergarten](#) flyers in all DASD schools, distributed to all local preschools, and placed in child-focused community locations (ex. Urban Air Trampoline Park, pediatrician offices, libraries, etc.)
- [Registration flyers](#)
- [Informational flyers](#)
- "Registration Open" [yard signs](#) at all 16 district schools and throughout community

