

NSPRA 2014 National School Communication Award Gold Medallion

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District: ISD 709 Duluth Public Schools
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Title of Entry: Think Kids Community Vision & Priorities
of Staff: 1
Type of School: 3,001 – 10,000 Students
Entry Category: Public Engagement/Parent Involvement

Please consider this entry for a Golden Achievement Award

Think Kids Community Vision & Priorities

Purpose: *To bring together the Duluth, MN community around its public schools, establish a common vision for public education, and prepare to renew and increase a local operating levy in support of that vision.*

ISD 709 had been unable to pass an operating levy increase since November 2003. Voters renewed that levy in 2008 but turned down an increase. Voters soundly rejected an opportunity to renew and increase the levy in November 2011.

Renewal of the levy by 2013 became a priority – without it, the District could lose up to \$4.4 million in education funding and \$1.1 million in additional State aid.

In July of 2012, the Superintendent began meeting with city, business, community, teacher and parent leaders. They recognized that, before a levy increase could pass, there needed to be a communitywide conversation about the public school system and a focused, community-driven vision for Duluth's schools.

These preliminary discussions became the genesis for *Think Kids: Our Schools, Our Community, Our Future*.

Through this initiative, people across Duluth were invited to participate in a conversation about education. Nearly 2,000 citizens from all walks of life took part, sharing thoughts about what's going well, what could be improved, what needs to be done now, and what should be done in the future.

The result is a set of shared values and beliefs from across the city and a new vision for Duluth's schools to guide future planning and decision making.

From that vision, people inside and outside ISD 709 created a 4-Year Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) with specific goals and targets, and progress shared through annual reports to the community.

School and civic leaders built the November 2013 operating levy campaign around this community-driven vision and citizens responded by voting to renew the levy and increase it by \$1.8 million.



Research

► **The Need to Renew/Increase a Levy:** In June of 2012, ISD 709 leaders had an important decision to make. Just two months before, the School Board approved a resolution to seek renewal of a soon-to-expire operating levy. Voters last approved an operating levy increase in November 2003. Voters renewed that levy in 2008 but turned down an increase. Voters soundly rejected an opportunity to renew and increase the levy in November 2011.

► **The Challenge:** ISD 709 had a new superintendent and was approaching the end of a multi-year facilities overhaul which took the district from three high schools to two, three middle schools to two, eleven elementaries to nine and one K-8 school to none. The remaining buildings were either rebuilt or substantially renovated and modernized, at an overall cost of about \$300 million. The project was paid for through a combination of a property tax increase, property sales, energy rebates and non-classroom savings realized by operating fewer schools.

In some cases, to facilitate work on a school building, schools were consolidated and students temporarily relocated to another school. During this time, the District also shifted use of desegregation funds from magnet schools to specific strategies to help close the achievement gap. Magnet schools became regular elementary schools which resulted in the loss of transportation for some of their students, necessitating a change of schools.

Citizens opposed to the construction project were vocal, stating the work cost too much, it was approved without a vote, it was disrupting the educational process, the district should keep more schools open, among other messages. At times, the discourse resulted in personal and professional attacks on those associated with the project, and on the operations of the district as a whole.

2011 survey results indicated a low confidence level in district leadership. The survey also indicated that people were tired of the debate regarding the facilities plan and even those who were not sure the plan was the right choice indicated a desire to finish the construction and move on.

Key stakeholders from the city, business community and others stated publicly that something needed to be done to bring people together around the public schools and move forward.

► **The Conversation Begins:** In July 2012, the Superintendent told the school board and the public that before an operating levy could pass there needed to be a community wide conversation about the public schools - what was going well, what could be improved, and what future priorities should be, in order to determine a clear direction and vision for Duluth's schools. The District decided to postpone the operating levy until November 2013.

Analysis/Planning

► **Identifying a Process and Outcomes:** The Superintendent held meetings with parent, school, community and district leadership regarding what a comprehensive community conversation in Duluth should look like and what the goals of such a process should be. It was determined:

- The opportunity to take part should be highly publicized
- The ability to participate should be open to anyone
- There should be many ways for people to take part – meetings, online survey, email, phone calls, snail mail
- People should have an opportunity to share any thoughts they wish on any topic
- All input should be recorded in some way
- The meetings should be structured so that, while all may speak and share, no one person or group could dominate the conversation.
- In addition to community meetings, groups and organizations could request their own opportunity to participate
- There should be a clear, tangible outcome. In this case, the data gathered should be used to create a community vision and priorities for ISD 709.
- That vision should be used to create a detailed set of goals and targets which would guide the work of ISD 709 for the next four years and impact all levels of the organization, from the classroom to administration to the school board.

► **Identifying Resources:** Given the high stakes nature of this effort, the District created a budget for Think Kids. Funds provided an opportunity to seek advice from a community engagement professional, a local communications/marketing firm (which contributed both paid and pro bono work), and to cover meeting and advertising costs.

► **Involving Community/District Leaders:** The Superintendent reached out to the Mayor's Office, Duluth Chamber of Commerce, United Way, LISC and other community leaders to create a Citizen Advisory Group to review plans and provide ongoing advice.

Internally, the Superintendent sought advice from the ISD 709 Management Team, and the ISD 709 Quality Steering Committee, a labor/management group comprised of representatives from administration, the teachers union, principals union and school board.

The District also recruited financial professionals from outside the organization to create a School Finance Community Group, to learn how school finance in Minnesota works, study the district's budget and provide advice.

Communication/Implementation

- ▶ From August through September 2012, the District worked with a community engagement professional to create a process meeting the goals identified through discussions with key stakeholders and community leaders.
- ▶ From September 2012 through October 2012, the District identified and trained facilitators how to effectively run the process. While the Superintendent and Board leaders might be present, a community or staff member would be in charge of the meeting.
- ▶ The District identified key audiences and developed plans for reaching each. Examples include, but are not limited to:
 - Parents:** Group email, Parent Portal, direct mail, newsletters, school take home packets
 - Staff:** Group email, school meetings, newsletters
 - School neighbors:** Direct mail invitations
 - General community:** Newspaper ads, TV ads, local media coverage
 - Communities of Color:** Personal invitations to key leaders to meet and discuss
 - Low Income Communities:** Work through local help organizations
 - Senior Citizens:** Meetings at community centers where noon meals and other senior activities are conducted
 - Students:** High School Exec Boards, Students for the Future group
- ▶ From November through December 2012 the District worked with a local firm to create a name, logo and graphics for the community conversation: *"Think Kids: Our Schools, Our Community, Our Future."* Key messages were developed and used for:
 - [:30 TV ad for local affiliates](#)
 - Ads for local daily, weekly and neighborhood newspapers
 - Handouts, flyers, posters
 - Direct mail invitations
 - Web pages, Facebook, blogs
 - E-Newsletter and hard copy articles
 - All Staff Emails
 - Press Releases, Media Interviews:
 - Samples: [NBC Affiliate](#), [FOX Affiliate](#), [KDAL Radio](#)
 - Superintendent's monthly column in local weekly newspaper
 - Sample: [July 2013](#)
- ▶ In December 2012, the Superintendent held a press conference, flanked by representatives from the Mayor's office, Chamber of Commerce and others, and announced the beginning of the Think Kids community conversation. The press conference included a list of over 30 meeting dates in February – March along with the online survey, and received newspaper, radio and television coverage.



► From December 2012 through January 2013, the Superintendent appeared on local TV and radio programs to talk about Think Kids. He met with the Editorial Board of the local newspaper and took interview requests. A television ad schedule ran on local affiliates, inviting people to take part in Think Kids and letting citizens know "we're listening."

► Think Kids meetings began the week of January 7 and ran through mid-February 2013. In addition to community meetings, District representatives met with groups and organizations. The District proactively sought out leaders and members of the local American Indian and African American communities.



► By the end of February 2013, nearly 2,000 citizens had taken part in the Think Kids conversation.

► In March 2013, staff organized the data gathered through the meetings, surveys and other communication venues and shared it with facilitators and the Citizen Advisory Group. Through a series of meetings, they identified common themes, which were used to create a draft ISD 709 Community Vision and Priorities document. The Draft Vision document, along with all the data gathered, was released to the public for review and comment at the end of March.



► In April 2013, the Draft Vision was finalized and presented to the School Board for approval.

[ISD 709 Community Vision and Priorities](#)

► In May 2013, the District received survey data which confirmed what the Think Kids process had identified as key priorities - reducing class size, addressing the achievement gap/raising student achievement, and updating curriculum. Professionals from the School Finance Committee, having studied the district budget for over 6 months, confirmed the need for an operating levy. At its May meeting, the school board approved moving forward with an operating levy in November 2013.



► In May through June 2013, the Superintendent worked with people inside and outside ISD 709 to create a 4-Year Continuous Improvement Plan with specific goals, targets and baseline data related to the Vision & Priorities. The School Board approved the Plan in July 2013.

[ISD 709 4-Year Continuous Improvement Plan](#)

► In July 2013, the District began its informational levy campaign, joined by a community-driven "Vote Yes" citizens group campaign. Both campaigns were built around the Community Vision & Priorities identified through Think Kids.



► In November 2013, Duluth voters approved renewal and increase of the operating levy.

[ISD 709 2013 Education Levy Website](#)

Newspaper Ad



THINK KIDS
OUR SCHOOLS.
OUR COMMUNITY.
OUR FUTURE.

"It's my hope that everyone will take the opportunity to join this important conversation and that, by this spring, our schools and community can move forward with a Common educational vision."
- Bill Gronseth, Superintendent of ISD 709

Our children need schools that welcome them, inspire them and educate them for the future. How we create those schools is up to all of us—as a community.

Think Kids is an invitation to everyone throughout Duluth to share their thoughts about education, the challenges we face, and work together to create the schools we want for our children as we move forward.

Parents, community and business leaders, teachers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors and more are invited—no one is excluded—**your ideas matter.**

Attend A Think Kids Meeting
Central Hillside Community Center
February 7, 2013
3:00PM – 5:00PM
12 East Fourth Street, Duluth

For questions or to request language services, assistance with transportation, or child care for a session please contact Ron Lake at Ronald.Lake@duluth.k12.mn.us or 218-336-8700 x2014.

Online, Mail or Phone:
Online at duluth.k12.mn.us
By mailing: Think Kids, ISD 709
215 North 1st Avenue East
Duluth, MN 55802
By phone: 218-336-8700 x2014



Flyer (Front)



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OUR COMMUNITY.
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Think Kids is an invitation to everyone throughout Duluth—parents, community and business leaders, teachers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors and more—to participate in a community-wide discussion and decision-making process about the future of our schools.

What do you want Duluth's schools to be?

What do you want Duluth schools to offer our children and our community?

What are we doing well now?

What could be done better?

Public schools across our country face challenges in terms of budgets and funding, curriculum, school climate and dozens of other issues. Duluth is no exception.

The goal of Think Kids is to discuss the challenges we face here in Duluth and to work together as a community to build on our common beliefs and values to create a strong, innovative roadmap to meet those challenges.

Now through March 2013, ISD 709 staff and volunteers will be meeting with people from across our community to discuss what you believe our schools should be and what you see for the future. Anyone who wishes to can share their ideas—no one is excluded.

Please watch for news about upcoming Think Kids meetings by going to our website at duluth.k12.mn.us

Poster



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Attend a Meeting

- Find a **Think Kids** meeting near you. See below or go to www.duluth.k12.mn.us
- Groups and organizations are encouraged to schedule a meeting of their own through the Office of the Superintendent at 218-336-8752.

Online, Mail or Phone

If you can't attend a meeting, please let us know what you think:

- Online at duluth.k12.mn.us
- By mailing: Think Kids, ISD 709
215 North 1st Avenue East
Duluth, MN 55802
- By phone: 218-336-8700 x2014

Sign up for the ISD 709 Email Newsletter at www.duluth.k12.mn.us

Additional Community Meetings:

- Peace Church**
1111 N. 11 Ave. E. - Jan. 15 (6:30 - 8:30PM)
- City Center West**
5830 Grand Ave. - Jan. 24 (10AM - 11AM)
- Portman Community Center**
4601 McCulloch St. - Jan. 28 (10AM - 11AM)
- Lincoln Park Community Center**
2014 West 3rd St. - Feb. 4 (3PM - 5PM)
- Morgan Park Community Club**
Feb. 5 (6:30 - 8:30PM)
- Central Hillside Community Center**
12 E. 4th Street - Feb. 7 (3PM - 5PM)
- Woodland Community Center**
3211 Allendale Ave - Feb. 7 (6:30 - 8:30PM)

Congdon Park Elementary School
(at Woodland) 201 Clover Street

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 8
6:00PM - 8:00PM

For Community Members:
January 17
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Homcroft Elementary School
4784 Howard Gnesen Road

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 17
6:00PM - 8:00PM

For Community Members:
January 16
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Lakewood Elementary School
5207 North Tischer Road

For Parents and Community Members:
January 10
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Laura MacArthur Elementary School
720 North Central Avenue

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 9
6:00PM - 8:00PM

For Community Members:
January 23
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Lester Park Elementary School
5300 Glenwood Street

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 14
6:00PM - 8:00PM

For Community Members:
January 15
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Lowell Elementary School
2000 Rice Lake Road

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 22
6:00PM - 8:00PM

For Community Members:
January 30
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Nettleton Elementary School
108 East 6th Street

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 8
6:00PM - 8:00PM

For Community Members:
January 28
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Piedmont Elementary School
2827 Chambersburg Avenue

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 7
6:00PM - 8:00PM

For Community Members:
January 14
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Stowe Elementary School
715-101st Avenue West

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 8
6:00PM - 8:00PM

For Community Members:
January 29
6:00PM - 8:00PM

Lincoln Park Middle School
3215 West Third Street

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 14
6:30PM - 8:30PM

For Community Members:
January 16
6:30PM - 8:30PM

Ordean East Middle School
2900 East Fourth Street

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 9
6:30PM - 8:30PM

For Community Members:
January 16
6:30PM - 8:30PM

Denfeld High School
401 North 44th Avenue West

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 7
6:30PM - 8:30PM

For Community Members:
January 10
6:30PM - 8:30PM

East High School
301 North 40th Avenue East

For Current ISD 709 Parents:
January 23
6:30PM - 8:30PM

For Community Members:
January 28
6:30PM - 8:30PM

For questions or to request language services, assistance with transportation, or child care for a session please contact Ron Lake at Ronald.Lake@duluth.k12.mn.us or 336-8700 x2014.

Evaluation:

▶ The Think Kids initiative, creation of the ISD 709 Community Vision & Priorities, and 4-Year Continuous Improvement Plan generated positive media coverage.

▶ Think Kids meeting evaluation forms indicated:

- 99% strongly agreed or agreed they shared important information
- 100% strongly agreed or agreed information shared was collected
- 99% strongly agreed or agreed the process was fair to participants

▶ 2013 survey results conducted following the Think Kids conversation indicated a higher confidence level in administration than in 2011.

▶ Key community leaders, including the Mayor of Duluth, Citywide PTSA, Duluth Chamber of Commerce, Duluth News Tribune, local union leadership and others came out in favor of approving renewal and increase of the operating levy.

▶ In November 2013, voters renewed the existing local levy and approved an increase of \$1.8 million. Renewal of the levy qualified the district for an additional \$1.1 million in State aid.

▶ Since November, teams associated with each goal in the 4-Year Continuous Improvement Plan and comprised of staff from every level of the organization are helping identify and implement strategies.

▶ District and school plans and tactics are built around the goals outlined in the 4-Year Continuous Improvement plan.

▶ The Fiscal 2015 budget process reflects the goals of the 4-Year Continuous Improvement Plan.

▶ Posters communicating the goals outlined in the 4-Year Continuous Improvement Plan are prominently displayed in each school and district building.

