NSPRA *Gold Medallion* Award Entry

$298 Million Bond Proposal

Approved by voters November 2015

Submitted March 2016 by:
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The Davis School District is one of the 100 largest school districts in the nation and second largest school dis-
trict in the State of Utah. More than 70,000 students currently attend its 87 schools. It is located north of Salt Lake City and is the second-largest employer in Davis County. The district continues to grow with an increased enrollment of 500-750 students a year.

To support this growth, the district successfully passed construction bonds in 2006 and 2009. Continued growth meant the district again needed to look at a bond in 2015, this time for $298 million.

The district faced a tough battle with this bond election.

Hurdles included:

- Difficult proposition language;
- First bond since 1998 to include a tax increase;
- An off-year election;
- And board members who voted unanimously to put the proposition on the ballot and then stated reservations about the bond publicly.

The district’s Community Relations office developed a comprehensive communication plan which targeted both internal and external audiences. That communication plan included, videos, community meetings, presentations to city councils and school and department staff, meet-the-candidate night visits, a comprehensive website, mailers, and social media.

This communication effort not only resulted in a successful campaign, but continues with a website detailing steps as each bond project is executed to continue building that trust with the community.

Passage of the 2015 bond will have a positive impact on the school district for many years to come. Not only will it build three elementary schools, a junior high and a high school, but it will also renovate deteriorating in-
frastucture in existing schools and allow for the updating of two high schools and a junior high, among other projects.
Research

The Davis School District has traditionally received great support from taxpayers when it has approached them with building bond proposals.

In 2002, voters approved a $190 million bond proposal by 86.6 percent.
In 2006, voters approved a $230 million bond proposal by 79.4 percent.
In 2009, voters approved a $250 million bond proposal by 63 percent.

In Utah, 50 percent plus one vote wins an election.

That being said, district officials didn’t want to take anything for granted when it approached voters in 2015 with a proposal to approve a $298 million bond. The district knew it was absolutely imperative to find out where voters stood regarding the proposal. And it needed to know what resonated with voters.

Finding the public opinion survey team
In July of 2014, the school district sent out a request for proposals for companies interested in providing it public opinion survey services. At the end of that process, the district contracted with Y2 Analytics, Salt Lake City, to furnish those services. Y2 Analytics is a market research and data analysis group with extensive experience measuring and analyzing public opinion in Utah and across the country. Its team included seasoned researchers, capable analysts, veteran consultants and database specialists. While its formal history as a company is brief — incorporated in 2013 — it has worked for various municipal entities and on nearly every major public policy initiative in the state. The names of the company partners are also well known because they have been reliable sources in the media for a number of years.

The goals
From the onset, Y2 Analytics believed it was critical to find out the thoughts of people likely to vote. The Y2 team worked with the school district to build a survey. The goals of the survey included:

1) Gauging people’s first impression of the proposed ballot language.
2) Finding out if the school district should propose a $250 million bond or a $300 million bond.
3) Determining what resonated with most-likely voters after they were informed about the growth in the county and the building projects the district was considering.
4) Gauging whether voters supported the building possibilities envisioned by the district after they received an explanation of those possible projects.

The methodology
The survey methodology involved interviews of likely voters modeled from data on voter history and drawn from the county file of registered voters. Eight hundred live caller interviews were fielded March 5-7, 2015, with 100 of those from each of the school district’s eight high school attendance areas.

The measurable findings from the survey
1) First impression of the ballot language: Since the ballot language was the item all voters would read while casting their ballots, Y2 and the district needed to know the challenge it created. The Utah Legislature has specifically outlined virtually all of the required verbiage in a proposed ballot. According to bond counsel, the district couldn’t change any of the language except for the financial numbers included in it. The language was legalese at its finest, and it easily created confusion.
Here’s what was read to those surveyed:

“OFFICIAL BALLOT PROPOSITION FOR THE DAVIS SCHOOL DISTRICT, UTAH
SPECIAL BOND ELECTION

Shall the Board of Education of Davis School District, Utah, be authorized to issue General Obligation Bonds in an amount not to exceed Two Hundred Ninety Eight Million Dollars for the purpose of paying all or a portion of the costs of acquiring land; acquiring, constructing, furnishing and equipping new school facilities, and improving existing facilities; and related improvements; and authorization and issuance of the Bonds; said Bonds to be due and payable in not to exceed twenty-one years from the date of issuance of the Bonds?

Property Tax Cost of Bonds: The District has other outstanding bonds for which a tax decrease would occur upon the retirement of such bonds which may not occur if the Bonds are issued. However, these outstanding bonds reduce over time such that the incremental property tax increase due to the issuance of the Bonds on residences and businesses within the District is expected to have a cumulative increase from current annual levels (after the full $298,000,000 of Bonds is issued) of approximately $7.49 on a $240,000 residence and in the estimated amount of $13.61 on a business property having the same value.

If the Bonds are issued as planned, (and without regard to the existing taxes currently paid for existing bonds that will reduce overtime) a property tax to pay debt service on the Bonds will be required over a period of twenty-six (26) years in the estimated amount of $168.84 per year on a $240,000 residence and in the estimated amount of $306.99 per year on a business property having the same value.

The foregoing information is only an estimate and is not a limit on the amount of taxes that the District may be required to levy in order to pay debt service on the Bonds. The District is obligated to levy taxes to the extent provided by law in order to pay the Bonds. The amounts are based on various assumptions and estimates, including estimated debt service on the Bonds and taxable values of property in the District.

FOR THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS (YES)
AGAINST THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS (NO)

Based solely on the bond language, the following information was found:

Q: Now that I have read the legal language as it might appear on the ballot, if this bond were on the ballot on an election today, would you vote for or against it?

50% LIKELY FOR

23% For, definitely
27% For, likely

42% LIKELY AGAINST

8% Against, likely
17% Against, definitely

Don’t know or unsure
Because of the finding, the district knew it had a challenge. It also knew what areas of the county were more supportive than others, based on the chart that broke down those polled by the district’s eight high school attendance areas.

![Support by Geography from Bond Language Table]

2) Should the district propose a $250 million or $300 million bond proposal? Based on the language of the proposal, what figure was more palatable? Was there a possibility of sticker-shock when the $300 million price tag was floated to voters? According to the survey findings, the $50 million difference didn’t seem to affect the thoughts of those polled.

![Bond Support by Total Amount Graph]

Now that I have read the legal language as it might appear on the ballot, if this bond were on the ballot on an election today, would you vote for or against it?
3) What messages resonated with those most likely to vote? Having top-of-mind feedback from those who were polled was important. This allowed the district to find out what the likely voters thought before they received information about the proposed projects.

Those surveyed were also told the district could only use the proceeds of a proposed bond on construction of new buildings and the improvement of others. The money couldn’t be spent on school administrators or teachers.
Growth was also a reason those who were polled seemed to support a district proposal, as was the need to upgrade existing facilities and make schools safer.

However, the thought that voters should support this bond simply because there was a long history of voters supporting schools didn’t resonate as well as the school district expected. So in the end, that message wasn’t used in the information campaign.

4) Did those who were polled support the proposed bond increase after they received information about the district bond proposal? Yes they did, as reflected in an 11-point percentage swing just on the information presented in the phone survey.
Based on the findings of the public opinion survey conducted by Y2 Analytics, the district began the process of crafting an information campaign for the bond proposal. While the district focused its message on those most likely to vote, it also knew it had to cast a broader net when it came to informing the public about the bond measure.

As the survey pointed out, 70 percent of those polled liked the fact that the bond would have a widespread result across the district. Seventy percent of those polled also knew that the growth the district was experiencing was a strong argument for the bond.

**Target audiences = Key influencers**

The district’s top target audience was its almost 6,000 employees. Without their backing of a proposed bond, the bond would be defeated. Early in the process, district employees were the first group to learn about the proposal. Those meetings involved 87 presentations to school faculties and 15 to district departments.

The second group of people included in the early information campaign were those who likely already supported schools: members of the school PTAs and school Community Councils. School PTAs are easily recognized as a part of the fabric of a school, but school Community Councils, while known in Utah, may not be familiar elsewhere. The Utah State Legislature passed a law in 2000 requiring every public school in the state to establish a Community Council. The duties of the school community council include developing a School Improvement Plan and School LAND Trust Program; assisting in the development and implementation of a staff professional development plan; and developing a reading achievement plan, among other things. The community councils are made up of parents and school staff members, with parents being in the majority. Eight of those meetings were held in cluster fashion.

Presentations were also made to 11 community groups ranging from the Rotarians and Kiwanis to the Davis Education Association and Utah Taxpayers Association; in open meetings to all of the mayors and city councils of the 15 municipalities found in the school district; to four editorial boards along the Wasatch Front. District representatives also attended 10 Meet the Candidate Nights throughout the county to answer questions about the bond proposal.
The presenters
Many people contributed to carry the load of making 151 total presentations in and out of the county. Presenters included Superintendent Dr. Bryan Bowles, Assistant Superintendents Craig Poll and Pam Park, Business Administrator Craig Carter, School Directors Dr. Rulon Homer, David Tanner, John Sheffield, Dr. Helene Van Natter and Gwen Hill, Community Relations Director Chris Williams and Community Relations Specialist Shauna Lund. When possible, high school principals were also presenters at Community Council Cluster meetings, and Viewmont High School Principal Dan Linford was also involved in meeting the KSL/Deseret News editorial board.

Selecting communication vehicles
The district knew this campaign had to include a multi-faceted approach to communication. Not every likely voter could attend a community council open house or view every video produced. However, the district cast its net far and wide in communicating the message of the proposed bond. The communication vehicles included:

- Face-to-face presentations
- Dedicated bond website
- A long- and short-version of the bond PowerPoint
- Main bond video (shown at virtually every presentation)
- Multiple Frequently Asked Questions videos
- Facebook messages and memes
- Twitter postings
- Voter information pamphlet
- Informational postcards
- Informational fliers
- Business cards sporting QR codes
- On-hold messages
- Bond open house yard signs
- School marquees that said Vote Nov. 3.

The specific budget and resources
The expenses the district paid for the 2015 “Room to Learn” bond proposal included $68,816.57 to Davis County for election costs; $47,100 to Y2 Analytics for two surveys completed in March and October 2015; and $3,710.70 for printing fliers, posters, signs, comment cards and business cards.
Showing the need at the junior high level
It was absolutely critical that the district show the dire situation that currently exists in its secondary schools. For years, the district had constructed elementary schools, but as those students grew up, they created the need for additional space at the junior high and high school level.
Showing the need at the high school level
Based on current growth projections, three of the district high schools were on track to become the size of a community college. Davis High, for instance, already has an enrollment equal to BYU-Hawaii. Each of those three high schools has reached capacity and is using portables to expand the capability to educate more students.
Fighting the ballot language

As indicated in the March public opinion survey conducted by Y2 Analytics, only 50 percent of those polled were supportive of the school district’s bond proposal based solely on the ballot language.

So in every bond presentation the district made, it spent time explaining the madness behind the legalese of the ballot language by showing this graphic.

As the graphic illustrates, taxpayers would pay an additional $7.49 over the next five years if the bond was approved. If the bond wasn’t passed, taxpayers would see their taxes decrease over that same time period by $168.84 — because as time goes by, the district retires debt it has already incurred.

The district also used its voter information pamphlet, to try to overcome the ballot language by stating this:

“To do the work associated with the proposed bond, homeowners would pay an average increase of $1 to $2 a year in taxes for the next five years — totaling $7.49 over that timeframe. That calculation is based on the median priced Davis County home, valued at $240,000.

“As for the ballot, some may find the wording a bit confusing. It will state ‘if the bonds are issued as planned — and without regard to the existing taxes currently paid for existing bonds that will reduce over time — a property tax to pay debt service on the bonds will be required over a period of 26 years … in an estimated amount of $168.84 per year on a $240,000 residence.’

“What does that mean? Without the proposed $298 million bond, property taxes from bonds voters have previously approved would gradually decrease over seven years by about $168.84.”
Communication

The comprehensive communication plan outlined the key messages that needed to be disseminated to both the district’s internal and external audiences, the timeline for communication efforts and its target audiences.

The branding
A simple slogan, paired with uniform colors and graphics, was used in all of its communication efforts. “Room to Learn” referenced the growing enrollment in the school district and the need for new schools. The concept was similar to the district’s existing overall mission statement of “Learning First.” This branding was used in every communication.

The messages
From the survey, the district targeted two messages which resonated with voters:

- The bond money could only be used for construction projects
- Construction projects would lead to safer and more secure schools.

Another key message was explaining the confusing bond language. We knew from the research that once people understood the language, they were more likely to vote for the bond.

Additionally, the tax increase of $1 to $2 a year was identified as an important message that needed to be communicated. Each message was used in various ways in all communication strategies.

The toolbox
Overview video (Timeline: Mid-August-campaign end) — A highly anticipated new high school was the first scheduled project of the construction bond. Building on those positive feelings, the introductory video followed a high school student in one of the overcrowded high schools and emphasized the need for “Room to Learn.” The video was shown at each community meeting, faculty and staff presentations, and city presentations. It was viewed by more than 3,000 patrons on YouTube. It was also shared on Facebook with more than 10,000 views.

PowerPoint presentation (Timeline: Late August-campaign end) — Community Relations developed a bond PowerPoint presentation to be used at the hundreds of meetings held throughout the campaign. The communications staff also developed talking points for presenters to use so consistent information was repeated during those presentations. A narrated copy of the Powerpoint was placed on the bond website.

Community presentations (Timeline: Early September-early October) — Presentations were scheduled in the north, central and south areas of the district. Community members were also invited to attend eight other community meetings targeting community council members. Notifications of those meetings included e-mails and call-outs prior to each meeting to all parents. Flyers were placed on Peachjar and in social media. Additionally, newspaper articles and signs placed at schools alerted patrons of the upcoming meetings.
Website (Timeline: June–campaign end) — A Room to Learn: 2015 Building Improvement and Construction Plan website was created and linked prominently from the district’s main web page. A graphic link was also embedded on all 87 school websites. The website followed the design of the PowerPoint, using the uniform colors and graphics. Pages within the website addressed:

- The growth
- The need at the junior high and high school levels
- The solution
- The ballot language
- FAQs
- Access to the multimedia used in the campaign
- Voter information
- Community presentation dates
- Press coverage links
- And results of the 2009 construction bond

Business Cards (Timeline: Mid-August-campaign end) — The Community Relations Department created a business card to be distributed to parents, as well as community members. The front of the card displayed the branding message “Room to Learn.” The back of the card contained the district’s web address and a QR code to quickly take recipients to the “Room to Learn” website. Cards were distributed by teachers at their parent-teacher conferences. The cards were also available at each presentation.

FAQ videos (Timeline: early September-early October) — Video has become a key communication method. The Community Relations Department created a series of videos to address some Frequently Asked Questions about the bond. As presentations were made in the community and questions were heard repeatedly, more FAQ videos were created. Each video was short and shared on the website and through social media. Additionally, administrators were apprised of the videos to share with their communities.

The videos answered these questions:

- What is a bond? Why bond?
- Why should we invest in more schools?
- What is the tax impact of the bond?
- What leads to the decision to build a school?
- Why should I support the bond if there is nothing in it for my school?
- How do you decide which projects will be in the bond?
- Why do you build the schools like you do?
- How does the cost of building a school compare to the price of other buildings?
- Where do I find the 2015 bond proposition on my mail-in ballot?

Informational flier (Timeline: Early September-late October) — At each community meeting and faculty and staff presentation, a two-page flier was distributed. Created by the Community Relations Department, the flier contained the key messages used throughout the campaign. The flier was also distributed to all parents through the electronic flier distribution service Peachjar.
Informational pamphlet (Timeline: Early October) — A tri-fold pamphlet was mailed to all registered voters. The pamphlet included the key messages, ballot language and voter information. The flier distribution was targeted to arrive in mailboxes near the time half of the county would be receiving its mail-in ballots.

Mailer postcard (Timeline: Late October) — A postcard was mailed out in late October. It targeted voters who were going to the polls vs. those who were using mail-in ballots. It contained simplified messages and pointed recipients to the website for information.

Social Media — (Timeline: Mid-August-campaign end) Facebook and Twitter were used extensively throughout the campaign. The introductory video, FAQ videos and fliers were all distributed through these mediums. Additionally, in the final weeks of the campaign, memes were created to reemphasize some of the key messages. Community Relations staff also monitored discussions about the bond proposal and addressed questions. Additionally, it monitored community Facebook groups for discussions and miscommunications about the bond referendum.
Friends of the 2015 Davis Bond

Early in the planning, the district identified influential individuals who would be critical in running the “Yes” campaign. The committee was chaired by Mark and Karen Bouchard — well-known education advocates. Mark Bouchard has served as the chair of Prosperity 2020, a business-led organization designed to promote K-16 education. Additionally, he served as the chair of the Governor’s Education Excellence Commission.

The committee included representatives from construction companies and architectural firms, as well as parents and grandparents of district students. The inspiration to include construction and architectural firms came from an NSPRA Seminar workshop given in 2015 by Kettle Moraine School District. Graphic designers, social media experts and videographers from those industries volunteered their time to help with the outside-the-district “Yes” campaign.

Messaging
The Friends of the 2015 Davis Bond focused on overcrowding and the low tax increase taxpayers would see if the bond passed (#buck49). Their communication toolbox included social media, videos, a website and Vote Yes campaign signs.

Videos
The “Yes” campaign videos included this video about a student in Farmington who decided she could sell lemonade to pay for the tax increase the bond would cost taxpayers.

Social Media
On Facebook, the Friends of the 2015 Davis Bond also used some humorous memes to grab attention. For example, there were two graphics that poked fun at the number of portables (see graphic above) used by the Davis School District. Another that spoke to how small the tax impact was.

Encouraging the “Yes” vote
About 800 Vote Yes signs were created by the Friends of the 2015 Davis Bond Committee and placed in yards throughout the district by volunteers.

Additionally, an electronic billboard along Interstate 15 encouraged a “Yes” vote and advertisements were streamed during previews at a local IMax theatre.
Evaluation

Bond elections in the Davis School District have generally received strong support from taxpayers in Davis County. However, the atmosphere has changed in the past few years with Common Core, charter schools and other distrusts of “government-run schools.” Prior to the election, the school district felt it would be valuable to gauge how well its campaign was resonating with likely voters.

As it did in March, the school district once again contracted with Y2 Analytics to conduct a tracking survey. This time an online survey targeted most likely voters. Y2 Analytics fielded 1,111 online interviews between Oct. 7-11, 2015.

The measurable findings from the survey

• Given only the ballot language, the bond got 61 percent support from most likely voters — that figure was up 11 percent from the earlier survey. Additionally, the survey showed a majority of the responders had heard something about the bond.

• Key messages in the district’s bond campaign were achieving the desired result — driving support from likely voters. Those messages included:

1) The bond was needed to help with growth.

   ![NEW FACILITIES DUE TO GROWTH](image)

   This bond is needed due to the rapid growth of Davis County. The school district has hundreds of new students being added each year. This bond adds new buildings and upgrades existing buildings to ensure the schools can accommodate everyone.

   Need due to growth is a strong argument — speaks to reality voters have seen.

   - 77% MORE LIKELY
   - 23% LESS LIKELY

   Much more likely
   Somewhat more likely
   Somewhat less likely
   Much less likely

2) The tax increase would only be about $1.49 per year.

   ![COST TO RESIDENTS](image)

   Voters responded to this message that put the costs in practical, per day terms.

   The bond will cost residents of Davis County less than half a penny a day — a total of an additional $1.49 per household per year.

   Need due to growth is a strong argument — speaks to reality voters have seen.

   - 76% MORE LIKELY
   - 24% LESS LIKELY

   Much more likely
   Somewhat more likely
   Somewhat less likely
   Much less likely
3) Facilities throughout the district would be impacted by passage of the bond.

After the message testing, support for the bond increased to 72 percent in Y2 Analytic’s tracking poll.

The survey also found other demographic factors increased support levels. Support increased in these groups:
- Voters with children or grandchildren in district schools;
- PTA volunteers;
- District employees.

The 2015 bond proposal was successful with an approval rating of 61.57 percent. Due to the number of cities using mail-in ballots, the voter turnout was higher than other off-election years with 38.05 percent of registered voters casting ballots. In 2009, the voter turnout was only 25.63 percent.

The bond proposal gained voter approval in 182 of 200 total precincts. It passed in all 15 municipalities.

Conclusion
The Davis School District is still growing and more construction bonds are in its future. In the district’s post evaluation, it looked at what worked, what didn’t and what it may change in the future. Here are some lessons learned:
- Community presentations — While the district had good-sized groups at the north, south and central community presentations, the community council meetings had sparse attendance. The district recognizes that further use of technology, such as Periscope, may attract more community members unable to attend the meetings due to small children or other complications.
- The Vote Yes committee was effective. Its timeline was short, but it was able to communicate several key messages and had the ability to do more than inform.
- Videos and social media were effective communication tools. Technology is changing bond campaigns. Social media barely existed in the 2009 campaign, but was heavily used in this campaign.
- Having the ability to put a link to the bond website on all school websites was critical.
- Y2 Analytics keyed in on the most critical people — those most likely to vote. The messages that resonated with those voters in the March survey drove the district’s entire campaign.
- The district plans to purposely use principals in its next bond campaign to take advantage of the “rock-star status” they have in their school communities.
- Preparation for a future bond campaign will begin behind-the-scenes prior to the Board of Education placing the resolution on the ballot. The timeline for the 2015 bond was only eight months in length.