

## 2010 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award Entry

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

When you were a child and you denied breaking something around the house, your parents may have told you that, "things don't just happen by accident." The same can be said for effective communications. *Classrooms in Crisis* was a comprehensive communications plan for Brevard Public Schools (BPS) with the purpose of engaging parents, staff and community in the fight for adequate legislative funding for public education. The initial result of the *Classrooms in Crisis* initiative led to over 10,000 parents, students, and community members attending a Town Hall Education meeting in February 2009 where they communicated with legislators. The final outcome of the *Classrooms in Crisis* initiative came in May 2009 when the Brevard County School Board approved by a 5 to 0 vote, the millage levy of an additional 0.25 mills to meet critical needs within the district's operating fund, which was allowable in Florida Statute 1011.71, authorizing School Boards, by super majority vote (4 of 5) to levy an additional 0.25 mill. Brevard County School Board was the first district in Florida to adopt this 0.25 levy. These additional funds resulted in a budget increase of \$8.7 million which allowed the district to balance its budget, keeping key student programs operating without laying off a single employee.

### ASSESSMENT:

Every time we turn on the television or read the local newspaper, we receive more alarming news about the faltering national and state economies. According to the Florida Department of Economic and Demographic Research, Florida's growth is decelerating. The state Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ranks Florida 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation (out of 50) in real growth. (Florida was 12<sup>th</sup> in 2006 and 2<sup>nd</sup> in 2005).

Over the last two years, as Florida's economy has been faltering, Brevard Public Schools' (BPS) annual budget has faced considerable funding challenges due to declining enrollment and state funding cuts. Since July 1, 2007 BPS has been forced to make budget reductions totaling over \$100 million dollars. These cuts were made without serious impact to core academic programs and without any layoffs to BPS valuable employees.

- BPS has cut programs/made reductions in the amount of \$101.4 million (\$42.7 million cut 2007-08 and \$58.7 million cut in 2008-09) in order to offset state and local revenue shortfalls and the resulting budgetary shortfalls.
- Budget cuts have been made in every area. A total of 120.63 positions have been eliminated through attrition and another 64.87 positions have been frozen to address the revenue shortfall.
- In addition to the \$58.7 million reduction in state funding already this year mentioned above, BPS was notified that a further deterioration in State general revenues has taken place. Since approximately 50% of K-12 education revenue comes from general revenue (primarily sales tax revenue), BPS is directly affected by shortfalls in this funding source. The Florida Commissioner of Education has notified all of the school districts that they should prepare for a further end-of-the-year revenue reduction of 4% in formula funding, which represents \$10 million for BPS.
- The 2008-2009 FTE projections were 73,199.82 students. The October estimated FTE has the actual student count at 72,286.84 students for a loss of 912.98 students. This calculates to a loss of \$2.5 million for BPS.
- An additional ongoing challenge faced by BPS is its relatively low per student state funding. On a per student basis, BPS is ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> out of the 67 Florida school districts in funding for 2008-09. This means that 34 school districts receive a higher amount of per student funding than BPS. The BPS funding rank for the prior year (2007-2008) was 36<sup>th</sup> out of 67 districts.

There is an unprecedented degree of uncertainty surrounding K-12 funding going forward for the current and future years. In December, 2009, BPS Superintendent Dr. Richard A. DiPatri was informed that the district's annual budget could potentially be cut an additional \$66-\$100 million for the 2009-10 school year. These potential reductions would have devastating effects on the programs and staff, which greatly impacts Brevard County community as a whole. Therefore, a *Classrooms in Crisis* campaign was launched to actively engage the BPS community to put pressure on the Florida Legislature to provide adequate public education funding.

### PLANNING:

The *Classrooms in Crisis* campaign had three main goals: 1) Educating and informing employees, parents, students, and community members about BPS' budget cuts and potential reductions to programs, sports, staff, and resources; 2) Engaging BPS employees, parents, and community members in a communication effort to inform our Brevard legislation delegation about the importance of funding public education appropriately. BPS' strategy was to use an engaging informational campaign that asked individuals to focus their efforts not on the School Board members, who do not have any input in the amount of funding received from the state, but on Brevard's Legislative delegation; and 3) Convincing community and School Board members that approving the 0.25 mills levy, as allowable by Florida Statute, was a way to meet the critical needs within the district's operating fund.

A *Classrooms in Crisis* coalition was formed to assist in this engaging informational campaign. The coalition was comprised of representatives from district parents, employee unions, community members, and administration, as well as the superintendent. The newly appointed acting Director of District Communications, along with the district's Chief Financial Officer and the Director of Labor Relations, served on this team as counsel to the *Classrooms in Crisis* coalition.

In addition to developing a communications plan that focused on both internal and external stakeholders, the *Classrooms in Crisis* coalition used the credibility of the superintendent, along with the community familiarity of school

level administrators, to help educate employees and public stakeholders and to obtain their active engagement in this campaign. Video and PowerPoint presentations were developed; business partners were contacted for their support; editorial board meetings and press conferences were scheduled to include media coverage; and a final culminating event involving the public questioning Brevard's legislative delegation was organized.

### EXECUTION AND COMMUNICATIONS:

The *Classrooms in Crisis* coalition and the district's Communications Department:

- Assisted in the development and analysis of an educational community attitude and information survey to gauge community understanding of budgetary issues.
- Analyzed budgetary and student demographic information of the state and district from the past eight years to identify trends.
- Researched past district information/engagement campaigns to identify delta (+) and alpha (-) aspects of these initiatives.
- Developed a *Classrooms in Crisis* communications plan that reached both internal and external stakeholders.
- Created a *Classrooms in Crisis* Web site where parents, staff, students, and community members could post money saving suggestions as well as read suggestions made by others. Additionally, all documents, including letters to parents and employees, Board meeting presentations, and budgetary documents were posted on the Web site.
- Assisted in the organization of letter, telephone, and site visit campaigns to our local legislators, Governor Crist's office, and Tallahassee committee members.
- Developed specific information documents for the two-level (internal and external) communications efforts. These documents included letters from the superintendent to staff and parents, budgetary summaries for the district's capital and operating funds, video messages, PowerPoint presentations, a principal's "toolkit" for engaging and informing employees and the school community, and more.
- Organized a meeting between the School Board members and the Brevard legislative delegation. The purpose of this meeting was to engage the two parties in discussions related to educational and budgetary issues.
- Analyzed information being published by the local legislators. If inaccuracies or inconsistencies were realized, corrections were submitted to the legislators and to the public.
- Planned editorial board meetings, press conferences and student press conferences to keep Brevard informed. The student press conference included all TV Production and Journalism students from the secondary schools.
- Initiated a weekly television information campaign using the district's TV station, BPS-TV. The campaign's focus was educating and informing the public of the issues facing Brevard and advertising the culminating event at the Maxwell King Center for the Performing Arts.
- Organized numerous meetings where key administrators and/or the superintendent addressed public/employee concerns. These meetings included area meetings, school meetings, parent meetings, School Board meetings, business partner and community leader meetings, and meetings with municipalities and key organizations such as the Legions.
- Executed district wide notifications using the "Rapid Parent Notification System." This telephone messaging service sent a pre-recorded message to every student and employee household.
- Developed sample school and PTA/PTO newsletter and marquee messages. These messages were also utilized by many business partners in their newsletters and marquees.
- Organized video/audio coverage of events. This was covered by the district's TV station as well as local news stations.
- Planned and organized a culminating event where the educational community could address their concerns directly to the Brevard Legislative delegation. Approximately 1500 concerned citizens and employees were expected to attend this Town Hall Education Meeting.

### EVALUATION:

Due to the engaging informational *Classrooms in Crisis* campaign:

- Over 10,000 individuals attended the *Classrooms in Crisis* Town Hall Education Meeting on February 23, 2009 (only 1500 were expected to participate). This resulted in massive media coverage supporting the campaign, as traffic jams and rallies dominated the evening news, thus emphasizing to Brevard legislators and to the state that adequate public funding is a priority for the citizens of Brevard County, and that the coalition's informational campaign was a success.
- The Central Florida Public School Boards Coalition joined BPS in this *Classrooms in Crisis* initiative, thus expanding the communications efforts to legislators and communities outside of Brevard.
- Key community and parent leaders developed their own Web sites, letter writing and legislator contacting campaigns, as well as donation sites for BPS thus illustrating the campaign's success at engaging the community.
- On May 26, 2009, the Brevard County School Board approved by a 5 to 0 vote, the millage levy of an additional 0.25 mills to meet critical needs within the district's operating fund, which was allowable in Florida Statute 1011.71, which authorized School Boards, by super majority vote (4 of 5) to levy an additional 0.25 mill. Brevard County School Board was the first district in Florida to adopt this 0.25 levy. These additional funds resulted in a budget increase of \$8.7 million which allowed the district to balance its budget, keeping key student programs operating, without laying off any of its 9,000 employees.