

2010 National School Public Relations Association



Gold Medallion Award Submission

Presented by:
Detroit Public Schools

PROJECT SUMMARY

PROJECT: Detroit Public Schools "I'm In!" Blue Door Student Retention Campaign
CATEGORY: Special Communication Projects/Campaigns

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Enrollment in the Detroit Public Schools has plummeted in recent years as the District developed a reputation as a low-performing district with a pattern of poor leadership, fiscal mismanagement and bad schools. As a result, in March 2009 Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm appointed Robert Bobb as the Emergency Financial Manager with a charge to overhaul District finances and operations and restore confidence in the school system. Bobb moved aggressively to root out corruption and turn the District around. His bold actions immediately reverberated throughout the community.

However, as the 2009-2010 school year approached, the District faced the possibility that enrollment would continue to spiral downward, with a projected enrollment of 83,777 students. To stem the downward spiral and exceed the projected enrollment, Bobb launched a campaign to aggressively inform Detroit citizens of the changes that were underway that were making the District a brand new entity, with finances that were under control and schools that would educate children. The campaign that ensued was the "I'm In" Blue Door campaign that featured a variety of actions and activities to rebuild public enthusiasm for and confidence in the Detroit Public Schools.

The goal was to achieve an enrollment that exceeded the original estimate, which would mean fewer empty classrooms and would preserve a larger portion of state educational funding. Every student enrolled above the budgeted number would bring \$7,550 in additional state revenue dollars. The district needed to enroll a minimum of 66 students more than the projected enrollment to generate enough state aid money to finance the retention campaign. Additional students beyond that would mean additional funds for a District facing a severe budget crisis.

Research conducted while the program was being developed revealed two important facts: (1) while the District was in dire need of improvement, it was also true that it offered many innovative—but little known—programs for its students and had several award-winning schools within its borders, and (2) it was common for parents and guardians not to enroll students until several weeks into the school year, hurting DPS during the fourth Friday count when the District's funding is determined by the state according to enrollment numbers. As a result, the following goals and objectives were adopted for the campaign:

1. Exceed the District's enrollment projections of 83,777 students.
2. Increase state funding by exceeding the 83,777 budgeted enrollment.
3. Use earned media value to create a more favorable perception of the district and positive media buzz.
4. Use Robert Bobb's popularity with the community to create public buy-in by generating community response and well-attended special events to create enthusiasm leading up to the start of school.

PLANNING

The "I'm In" Blue Door student retention campaign was designed to highlight the changes underway in the District, to assure parents and students a new day had arrived at DPS and to encourage Detroit parents and students to choose DPS. A key visual component for the campaign was 172 6-foot-8 by 3-foot, "life-sized" blue doors mounted on platforms and imprinted with the "I'm In" logo, representing the opportunities available for students who attended one of DPS' 172 schools.

Our themes and messages included:

1. DPS opens doors of opportunities for students.
2. DPS offers quality academics at award-winning schools.
3. DPS offers unique trade programs, such as aviation, medicine, and culinary programs.
4. DPS is experiencing positive change under the direction of EFM Robert Bobb.

In order for the campaign to be successful, we sought community buy-in from groups that included: DPS parents, students, teachers and staff, Detroit elected officials, Detroit residents and senior citizens in non-student households, business and faith-based leadership, the media, and the general public. We felt we could reach these groups through the iconic image of the blue door and as a community say "I'm

In" for education initiatives. The campaign was implemented and supported through major community events, paid advertising, direct mail to community influencers, collateral materials such as: lawn signs, posters and t-shirts, volunteer celebrity support, and an original campaign jingle performed by DPS students.

IMPLEMENTATION/COMMUNICATION

The following components of the campaign were conducted July -September 2009:

- **Media Partnership Appeal.** EFM Robert Bobb hosted a briefing for print and broadcast executives to generate media buy-in early in the campaign. We then held a general press conference for beat reporters on the same day.
- **Traveling Blue Doors.** In the weeks leading up to the opening of school we displayed the 172 "life-sized" blue doors at Hart Plaza (a large public area downtown), Belle Isle Park (a 982-acre park located in the Detroit River that is a city icon) and the Michigan State Fair (located on Detroit's north side) to encourage registration. Community groups requested blue doors for display at special events throughout the campaign.
- **Created a Signature Event.** An "I'm In" Blue Door Student Freeze performance was staged at Hart Plaza surrounded by 172 blue doors, creating an opportunity for students and parents to show DPS "spirit."
- **Back to School Parade.** Worked with the long-standing Detroit Thanksgiving Parade Company, a parade of DPS students and parents was held in downtown Detroit on Woodward Avenue, the main north-south street in Detroit.
- **DPS "I'm In" Jingle.** A theme song, "Great Things are Happening," was produced and performed by DPS students.
- **Direct Mail.** Hundreds of faith-based and community influencers received a mailing that included a schedule of events, slicks and information to share. Special DPS school resource book with information on each school was distributed to parents and students.
- **"I'm In" Sunday.** A special appeal was made to the faith-based community to encourage enrollment the last Sunday before the first day of school.
- **Utilize Celebrity Spokespeople.** Former NBA star Derrick Coleman and actor and activist Bill Cosby were recruited as volunteer advocates. The community was invited to paint the doors blue with Coleman and Robert Bobb and Cosby went door-to-door in Detroit neighborhoods personally recruiting students.
- **Creative Advertising/Marketing.** Bus wraps, 15 second television commercials, 60 second radio spots and celebrity PSAs were produced to support the campaign.
- **Blue Doors at DPS.** The doors to all 172 DPS school buildings were painted blue and all 172 schools had free standing blue doors installed in front of each building for the first day of school to greet returning students.

EVALUATION

The campaign produced the following six outcomes:

1. The District exceeded its enrollment goal of 83,777 students by 830 students with a total enrollment of 84,607.
2. The campaign paid for itself because the 830 additional students generated \$6.2 million in state funding, more than 12 times the cost of the \$500,000 student retention campaign.
3. The campaign maximized earned media value by generating 202 print, radio, TV and online earned media hits with a total value of \$1,509,510 – more than three times the total cost of the project.
4. Community excitement was generated with six well-attended special events leading up to the opening of school.
5. A huge demand continues eight months later for any paraphernalia bearing the blue door logo, including relentless requests from community groups for the blue doors themselves to be staged at their own events. Lawn signs bearing the blue door "I'm In" logo are still prevalent in front of Detroit homes and businesses.
6. The community has continued to embrace the "I'm In" message as student groups, parents and even DPS staff have replicated and expanded the "I'm In" theme through original skits, cheerleading routines, videos and songs.