Racine Unified School District

Academies of Racine
Transforming high school education in RUSD

2017 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award Entry
Special Communication Projects/Campaigns

The Office Communication and Community Engagement
Racine Unified School District
Synopsis

In 2015, RUSD began developing the Academies of Racine - Career Academies and Pathways within each of its three comprehensive high schools. This Ford NGL career academy framework represents a significant shift from traditional teaching and learning to a hands-on, project-based, career-focused structure that provides students with the skills they need to be competitive in the professional world and engages them in relevant, real-world learning. The Academy model also required our high schools to shift to block scheduling, a historically controversial topic in RUSD.

The successful rollout of this new model required a strategic communication plan that:

- Engaged all stakeholders – families, staff and community partners - to build understanding and support for the transformation.
- Engaged high school staff to ensure they felt supported and build their confidence in embracing and implementing significant changes in instruction.
- Clearly communicated what the changes were, while building excitement for what the Academies of Racine would offer.
- Engage community partners including business partners and local businesses to partner with RUSD offering resources, support, opportunities for apprenticeships, job shadowing, etc.

As with any transformative change, we faced obstacles: fear of change and organized opposition to block scheduling were the most challenging. Our strategies focused on collaboration with all stakeholders from early on to ensure all involved felt ownership in the decision-making process. It was essential to develop unique strategies targeted to our staff as well as families and community partners.

This campaign succeeded in launching the Academies of Racine – a transformative model – at all three of our comprehensive high schools this fall 2016. We’ve experienced little opposition since the fall and are partnering genuinely with our teacher’s union to continuously improve as we expand and grow the Academies. When the union vice president says, “Our teachers really felt like you listened. It’s working,” you know you’ve succeeded.
Program Overview

Background and Research

Racine Unified School District (RUSD) is the fifth largest public school district in the state of Wisconsin with nearly 20,000 students. We are a diverse, urban district that also includes some rural communities. Two contradictory statistics about our community compelled us to consider dramatic change for our three comprehensive high schools. First, within our District, the City of Racine currently has maintained the highest unemployment rate in the state for some time (lingering around seven percent), while Caledonia, one of our more rural villages, has one of the lowest. Second, thousands of quality, high-paying jobs in our region go unfilled in manufacturing, engineering, technology, health care and education. This unemployment/applicant gap is significant. Informal research told us that local employers don’t believe our graduates are prepared for jobs that exist right here in our own community.

While RUSD used to be considered a model District in the state and nationally, over the years, the community has seen good manufacturing jobs leave, the unemployment rate climb and the number of students living in poverty continuously grow. Our comprehensive high schools have been rated as Failing to Meet Expectations on recent state report cards. Additionally, over the past five years, enrollment in District middle and high schools has continued to decline. To address these issues, RUSD set out to transform secondary education in RUSD and create what would become the Academies of Racine.

We began researching models in 2014. We organized a high school transformation team to begin this exploration and research, which included visits to other school Districts. To create ownership and buy-in, the team included all stakeholders: administrators, high school teachers, counselors and principals, community leaders, businesses, post-secondary institutions and parents. Each individual stakeholder was able to research aspects of the high school model that they were an expert in. For example, a high school technical education department chair was able to meet with his counterpart in Nashville Public Schools to discuss their transformation process, best practices, common errors in implementation, etc.

After research, discussion and school visits, the high school transformation team identified the Ford Next Generation Learning (NGL) model for career pathways and academies. The Ford NGL career academy framework represents a significant shift from traditional teaching and learning to a hands-on, project-based, career-focused structure that provides students with the skills they need to be competitive in the professional world and engages them in relevant, real-world learning. The Academy model would require high schools to shift to block scheduling, a historically controversial topic in RUSD.

Goals: Communicating Change

Goal: Successfully launch the Academies of Racine at our three high schools in fall of 2016.

Objectives

- Engage high school staff to build support and buy-in for the transformation to Academies.
- Support high school staff to ensure they are confident in moving to the new model.
- Engage, raise awareness and build excitement among RUSD families about the opportunity for all high school students at Case, Horlick and Park to take part in high school career academies.
- Engage middle school families to build excitement and encourage them to choose RUSD schools.
- Engage Racine businesses and post-secondary institutions in opportunities to partner in building successful career academies aligned to career opportunities in Racine.
**Analysis/Planning**

Planning for the roll out of the Academies of Racine spanned nearly 18 months. It involved creating a new Office of Secondary Transformation (OST) with four staff members to carry out the restructuring of our high schools guided by a Master Plan. The Master Plan details the collaborative work and effort of the entire high school transformation team. The communication and community engagement team played an integral role in supporting the master plan development as well as leading the effort to brand and roll out the new Academies of Racine.

**Spokespeople**

Spokespeople for our communication campaign included Superintendent Dr. Lolli Haws, Chief of Secondary Transformation Dan Thielen and our three high school principals. Dr. Haws was an excellent spokesperson in the community, with Board members and families. Dan Thielen and his team were ideal spokespersons for engaging business and post-secondary partners as their expertise lies in curriculum, business, STEAM and technical education and community partnerships. To engage our high school staff, our high school principals served as spokespersons. Their existing relationships and trust with their staff supported the effort to convince staff to embrace significant changes. Additionally, when we hired well-respected high school teachers to serve as Academy Coaches, we gained three more well-known and trusted spokespersons. They became a tremendous asset in building staff support and buy-in.

A primary focus throughout this campaign was to keep our high school principals engaged and involved in decision making and up to speed with the most current information. They were expected to lead excellent and positive communication campaigns to support their staff through the implementation of the Academies. We armed them with tools to respond to staff questions. For example, when block scheduling became the biggest issue, we provided key messages and visited their schools to support them in responding and communicating to staff and parent questions and concerns.

**Target Audiences**

Internal audiences included:
- Board of Education
- High school principals
- High school staff (most challenging and included Racine Educational Association union)
- All District staff

External audiences included:
- RUSD students and families (primarily high school and 8th grade)
- Racine business community
- Local post-secondary institutions
- Community members - community agencies, chamber of commerce, political leaders
- Students/families who have opted out of Racine Unified

**Key Messages**

The Academies of Racine will offer all RUSD high school students:
- Smaller, personalized learning environments
- Partnerships with businesses providing opportunities for students to solve real-world problems for authentic learning
- A focus on 21st century skills students need to succeed in college and life
- A culture of teamwork, critical thinking, collaboration and creativity
- Rigorous interdisciplinary curriculum
- Preparation for college and career

**Budget**
Existing communication department budget was directed toward this campaign as well as some grant funds through local partners supporting the high school transformation effort:
- $17,500 for print advertisements and billboards
- $6,000 for branding – logos and brand guides (grant funds)
- $1,000 for printing of informational collateral
Additionally, District communication staff developed videos, web and social media content.

**Communication/Implementation**

**Timeline**
Our strategic communication effort began in fall 2015 after completion of the master plan and our own communication plan. It continued until launch of the Academies of Racine in fall 2016. It continues today as we continue to implement, grow and enhance the Academies.

**Branding**
The first task was to create a logo for the Academies of Racine. We hired a local design firm and engaged staff and leadership from all three high schools in the process of choosing the final logo. We developed a version for each high school so we have one cohesive brand and school colors and pride within the individual school logos.

**Internal Communication**
Keeping our own people informed and engaged is essential, especially when asking them to embrace significant change. Before the Academies of Racine were launched, we enlisted the help of some of our award-winning high school teachers to share with them our plans for the Academies and to ask for their input and ideas. Their input helped us to develop weekly staff emails for high school principals to send to their respective staff. These emails were provided to principals as a tool for communicating with their staff. This regular communication included updates regarding implementation of the Academy model, professional development opportunities for staff and tools to be able to adapt their curriculum to the Academy model. We continue to send those emails today. In addition, the Office of Secondary Transformation regularly reports and updates the Board of Education. In an effort to keep all high school staff and community partners engaged around the Academies of Racine we developed a quarterly newsletter, AoR Quarterly.

**Website (June 2015-Today)**
Once the Board approved the Academies of Racine model, we launched a page on our website (www.rusd.org/AcademiesofRacine) to build excitement and keep our students, staff and community informed. This became the go-to resource which we kept current with all valid information, graphics, videos, etc. As decisions were made, the latest information was added. We developed an extensive Q&A housed here as well. This Q&A has continued to evolve throughout different phases of the implementation. Parents, staff and students appreciated and often referenced this document.

**Community Presentations**
This presentation set the stage by defining the Academies of Racine, the goals and our timeline for
implementation. This presentation was used by key District spokespeople to present to various stakeholder and community groups including families of students at our three comprehensive high schools. This presentation was also customized for some key audiences like the business community. This version highlighted ways they could become involved in the Academies of Racine.

**Social Media (Facebook & Twitter)**
Using Hootsuite we developed a social media plan/schedule for Facebook and Twitter that utilized our key messages and included weekly posts. We posted videos (see below), photos and messages focusing heavily on how the Academy model will benefit our high schools. These provided great visuals and a chance for the community to feel a part of the transformation. We responded to questions and created posts that encouraged dialogue among our followers. In addition, we encouraged Office of Secondary Transformation to create their own Twitter account, housing Academy-specific information.

As mentioned earlier, transitioning to a block schedule became the main sticking point for some of our staff and at one point during the campaign, the teachers’ concerns started to be conveyed to students who began a Twitter campaign: #stoptheblock. We looked to our excellent colleagues in Peel School District and utilized a successful approach they had implemented on social media. We created a #FactsMatter graphic and responded to students in plain language via Twitter. This helped to clear up misunderstandings and calm many of our concerned high school students.

**Video**
We created several videos for use on the website and social media during our rollout and implementation. The first five videos featured RUSD high school staff, current students, members of the business community and post-secondary education partners who explained what the Academies of Racine are and how they plan to get involved. In the last video, we followed our high school teachers as they explored different businesses in the community and learned how those businesses could offer opportunities for their students both while in high school and after graduation. We continue to put together high-quality videos that highlight the work being done with each of our Academies.

Feb. 1, 2016: Academies of Racine: Park High School
Feb. 5, 2016: Academies of Racine: Horlick High School
Feb. 15, 2016: Academies of Racine: 8th Grade Impact
Feb. 23, 2016: Academies of Racine Case High School
March 4, 2016: Academies of Racine: Community Impact
Nov. 3, 2016: RUSD Secondary Roundtables

**Direct Mail & Backpack Flyers**
Direct mail and backpack flyers, especially in the final weeks of the 2015-2016 school year, were an effective communication tool to build excitement and awareness and encourage late enrollees. We targeted incoming freshmen (students that would enter high school as the Academies of Racine rolled out) and made sure to use a local printer and mail house for these projects as we of course were very budget conscious. We also targeted private school families who we know have open enrolled out of RUSD in an effort to bring some of those families back to the District.

**Backpack Flyer (April 2016):** Full color, front and back flyer distributed to all 8th grade families.
**Mailer #2 (Nov. 1, 2016):** High school open house postcard to all incoming 8th graders in Racine County encouraging them to check out the new Academies of Racine.
Media Outreach

Racine Journal Times Editorial Board. We met with the editorial board of our local newspaper on multiple occasions. We knew it was important for them to write a positive and supportive editorial piece about the Academies of Racine to support community buy-in. It was especially important when we faced some opposition from the teacher’s union regarding block scheduling. We kept our local reporters and editorial board armed with the most current information and our key messages. We also asked community leaders who were supporters to speak with the editorial board of our local newspaper. We encouraged supporters to write articles of support. These efforts paid off.

Racine Journal Times: We worked diligently to get well-timed, positive coverage, including:

Aug. 24, 2015: Workforce developers: Area businesses step up to improve education system (Cover Story) Article features RUSD and community as an example of schools and businesses working together to transform education.

Nov. 9, 2015: 440 RUSD high school educators participate in business roundtables – High school educators toured local businesses in an effort to make those initial connections to find out how they can assist their student.

Dec. 10, 2015: Unified academies advance, block schedules being discussed – Journal Times reporter gave a preview of the Academies of Racine and highlighted a few of the changes coming in the fall.

August 21, 2016: Academies of Racine: Promoting a broader range of opportunities – We invited Journal Times reporter to have an exclusive Q&A session with our Chief of Secondary Transformation to talk about all things Academies.

Feb. 17, 2016: Community Newsletter: RUSD is ready to launch the Academies of Racine – Superintendent commentary supporting the Academies of Racine.

Other Local Media: In addition to our local daily paper, we consistently provided information and interviews for our local radio (WRJN and WGTD) and news blog (Racine County Eye). We also developed a radio ad highlighting our partnership with a local company. This fall, we also conducted interviews with Milwaukee TV stations and appeared exclusively on a morning talk show.

March 19, 2016

- Racine and Me (CBS 58): Racine & Me is a 30-minute news show that features great things happening in Racine County. For this episode, the reporter exclusively highlighted the Academies of Racine interviewing our Director of Technical Education.

August 23, 2016

- CBS 58: In-depth story on the Academies of Racine just a couple days before the first day of school; highlighted the Academies of Racine and featured Superintendent Dr. Lolli Haws.

Billboards & Other Advertising

For the first time, we purchased billboards throughout the community promoting the Academies of Racine. We strategically chose three locations within the boundaries each of our three high schools. The billboards featured images of our high school students donning graduation cap and gown with the tag line, “Be Part of the Transformation.” We also placed ads in our local newspaper encouraging the community, whether it be students, families or employers, to be part of the transformation.

Flyers

A primary informational tool used throughout the rollout was a Freshman Academy Guide. Thousands of copies were printed and distributed to all incoming high school freshmen and were distributed meetings and public events. We also included a one-page fact sheet in all of our District newsletters and on our website. Copies of the one-pager were sent to every school for open houses in August and additional copies were put on display in school offices.
#FACTS MATTER

A block schedule does **NOT** mean fewer opportunities for electives. In fact, the block schedule **will allow for up to three MORE credits of electives** like music, art, world language etc.

A block schedule **NOT** mean closed campus lunch. Park, Horlick and Case students will continue to have the same open campus lunch they do now.

A block schedule **WILL** mean more class time to dig in to great hands-on projects that will help you see the value of what you’re learning in the real world.

A block schedule **NOT** require uniforms. We promise.

On a block schedule, students **WILL** still have the opportunity for early release time, so that you may participate in job or internship opportunities.

To learn more about the Academies of Racine go to www.rusd.org.
Be part of the transformation! #Fall2016
#UnifiedPride @THECASEEAGLES

Thank you @gatewaytech & @uwparkside for letting our @Walden3ii, @Park_Panthers & REAL freshmen explore your campuses today #round2tomorrow

Looks like our #RUSD staff alongside @AlbrechtBryan are having a great time at the @FordNGL conference. #BringingBackSomeKnowledge
Be part of the TRANSFORMATION

RUSD HIGH SCHOOLS WILL BECOME: AR
THE ACADEMIES OF RACINE
LEARN MORE rusd.org

FALL 2016
Be part of the TRANSFORMATION

THE ACADEMIES OF RACINE

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FALL 2016
Come check out the new Academies of Racine at Case, Horlick and Park High Schools

Don’t miss freshman orientation:
December 12, 6 - 8 p.m.

Contact your school to schedule a tour!

2017-2018 Freshmen:
Join us during orientation and experience your school...

- Meet teachers and staff
- Learn about courses
- Check out extracurricular opportunities
- Learn more about the Academies of Racine
- Find out what your RUSD high school has to offer!

www.RUSD.org
Case: (262) 619-4200
Horlick: (262) 619-4300
Park: (262) 619-4400
**Evaluation**

This fall, we nailed our goal and successfully launched the Academies of Racine! We launched with our incoming freshmen class and will add a class each year for the next three years.

**Achieving Objectives**

*Engage high school staff to build support and buy-in for the significant changes:* The majority of staff supported the changes going into the fall. Others have come around. Even some who strongly opposed changing to the block schedule have admitted it has turned out well. In a community where union action is very strong and loud, it was a win that our school board continued to support administration and our high school transformation team through some opposition to the block schedule. Because the team represented all stakeholders, the Board was compelled to honor their work and investment.

We have embraced a model of continuous improvement. For example, this fall, our first try at a finals schedule had some flaws. When we worked with teachers to revise the schedule for spring, the teacher’s union vice president said: “Our teachers really felt like you listened. It’s working!”

*Support high school staff to ensure they are confident in moving to the new model:* It’s certainly not perfect, but teachers expressed feeling a great level of support as they transitioned to a new model and block scheduling.

*Engage, raise awareness and build excitement among RUSD families about the opportunity for all high school students at Case, Horlick and Park to take part in high school career academies:* Family attendance at fall open houses was at a record high! Parents are thrilled at the new opportunities. Students are taking advantage of the changes. We have gone from approximately 50 students enrolled in biomedical courses to more than 300. We have doubled the number of courses in this area. And overall, we have reduced the number of remedial courses offered at ALL three high schools. This demonstrates that our students are already becoming more engaged in their learning opportunities and with higher level courses, will certainly be more prepared for college or career!

*Engage middle school families to build excitement and encourage them to choose RUSD schools:* Freshmen orientation for 2017 freshmen was extremely successful and well attended, demonstrating excitement for the Academies. Additionally, this past year, open enrollment out of the District (which has steadily increased for the past several years) dropped by approximately 40 students.

*Engage Racine businesses and post-secondary institutions in opportunities to partner in building successful career academies aligned to career opportunities in Racine:* RUSD is enjoying more community support than it has in many years. Currently, 148 local business have partnered with RUSD on some aspect of the Academies of Racine. Two local post-secondary institutions have partnered with us to offer, for the first time, ALL freshmen the opportunity to tour two college campuses. And the partnerships are expanding and growing!

**The work continues...**

It is thrilling to see the energy in our District, but also in the community. RUSD will continue to engage the community as we expand our Academies. In the last two years, RUSD has experienced unprecedented support from the Racine community – especially local business. People are noticing the changes that we are making and they are seeking opportunities to be involved in our transformation.
Gateway Technical College's Information Technology Academy has begun offering its courses to area high schoolers, giving them a way to earn college credits while in high school and begin training for their future career before they even graduate.

Several Racine Unified School District students enrolled in IT-Academy Pathways, which offers them the ability to earn three to 19 transcripted credits toward a Gateway Technical College degree, at no charge. The academy began with the fall 2015 semester.

"The academy gives them a great head start on their college coursework and they can earn credits — for free," says program director Juliet Springsteen.

Transcripted credit means the high school students earn Gateway Technical College credits directly from Gateway Technical College, even though they are still in high school. Those transcripted credits will save students the cost of tuition, up to $2,442 if they earn all 19 credits. In addition, because the academy is paid for by a state grant, students save even more — all associated materials and books are provided to students at no charge.

"It's a terrific way to explore the field of information technology, which is a very in-demand career field right now," says Springsteen. "Taking the courses in high school helps them to jumpstart that career."

Web developer and computer support positions are among the fastest growing field in Gateway Technical College's three-county district of Kenosha, Racine and Walworth, according to labor group surveys. They project these positions will increase by 8 percent in 2015, 17 percent in 2017 and continue to increase to 29 percent through 2023. Information technology careers provide solid, family-supporting wages for trained applicants.

Courses are taught at the high school by high school teachers, but use the same textbooks and materials as the college, and credits earned apply toward a Gateway Technical College degree. Teachers provide instruction to meet the standard of a college-level course.

"Students are gaining technical skills right now, in high school, by faculty who are teaching to the college curriculum level," says Chris Vendkus, IT instructor for Gateway Technical College and the Academy. "The academy provides a way to offer students the technology and training at the high school level. Gateway Technical College already has in place much of the technology and resources needed for students to engage in IT coursework that some high schools may not have now."
The SEE Your Future Expo was held this fall. More than 40 businesses and post-secondary institutions came together to partner with RUSD to provide high school freshmen with exposure to local jobs and post-secondary opportunities.