

# Communicate and Engage



Developing partnerships with stakeholders is crucial to referendum success

*Jill Huskisson*

If you've been searching for the formula to guide your district through a successful referendum, you may be feeling a bit exhausted. The recipe for success is not likely found in any strategy playbook or the most polished set of referendum campaign materials. And I am certain there is not a "one size fits all" professional resource bin to meet the unique needs of our state's schools and diverse communities.

School board members are working harder than ever to be

knowledgeable, to advocate, and to serve their district well. Yet, armed with a set of common facts and the best intentions, it is a challenge for a well-functioning board to build consensus for priorities — internally or externally.

What I know is that our best examples of referendum success run parallel with boards and districts who value strong partnerships and those who cultivate a healthy appetite for communications and engagement within the communities they serve. As with many educational pri-

orities, referendum success is aligned with the ability to effectively identify and explain the needs, take risks to wrestle with solutions alongside stakeholders, and, ultimately, to advance plans that reflect the priorities and values of a broad community.

In the recent 2014-15 election cycles, voters in Wisconsin approved nearly \$950 million for modernization and new construction for public schools. This success represents countless hours of work to articulate the "what, why, and how much it





will cost” of proposed referenda. It also represents a tremendous effort by school boards and districts to bolster a foundation of understanding around a stream of complicated and relentless currents that fuel the ever-growing needs.

Was there a common thread to success? Certainly having a qualified team of support and a solid referendum strategy that relied on broad communications and engagement was a factor. But so too were efforts leveraged by dedicated boards willing to have honest conversations

about commitment and the need to build trust within their communities. It was not easy. For many, it required a leap of faith to open the (boardroom) doors and embrace a process that banks on the power of collective thinking and problem solving. Believing in the potential of communities to support the future begins with the discipline to start today.

■ **Authentic Communications**

Implementing effective communication and engagement strategies that



# Communication & Engagement for Referendum Success



**Engagement provides opportunity** to inform, consult, collaborate and empower. Understanding the difference, and the perceptions associated with each, should be clearly understood and communicated. A great explanation of setting public participation goals and establishing appropriate outcomes (the “Promise”) is found in the work of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

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**Board consensus** for data-based decision making keeps it real. Integrate check points throughout the process that incorporates quantitative and qualitative feedback to inform your work.

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**Having the right strategies** and the best team will not compensate for having the wrong solution. Communities will not support what they do not understand.

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**Take advantage of time.** If you need referendum experience to guide you through the process, start early and identify a team of professionals you trust. Then trust your team.

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**Set expectations today** for the role of communications in your district and engage your community in honest conversations about the successes, the failures and the need to plan together for the future.



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bring the community into conversations and decision making doesn't need to be complicated or a threat to the responsibilities and authority of the school board. In fact, a far likelier outcome is an increased awareness and support for the difficult job at hand. This is particularly true when you are considering referendum as a vehicle to meet your facility and operational needs.

Along with the awareness that our students learn in a multitude of ways, so do our staff and community members. Your communication and engagement plan should be broad, recognizing the barriers that require accommodations for language and culture, access to technology and personal preferences. My one rule of thumb, no matter what you do, remember to always begin

with your teachers, support staff, food service and custodial team.

Get in the habit of communicating from the "inside-out." Studies have shown that a great majority of your residents' learning, as it concerns your community's schools, comes from word of mouth and your district staff. Recognizing the obligation to inform and equip our internal teams first with understanding of

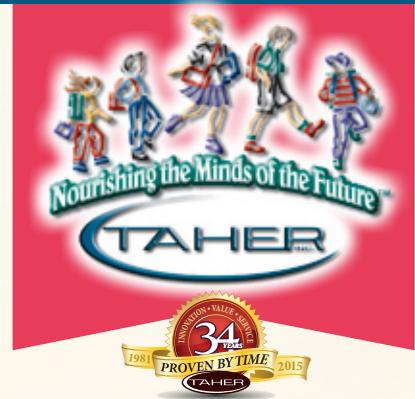
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plans, process and referendum specifics is vitally important and, the right thing to do.

Whether it is your internal or external stakeholders, establish timely key messages, be relentless about sticking to the facts, and use a variety of vehicles to carry your message. It doesn't have to be complicated, but it does require a thoughtful plan.

### **■ Genuine Engagement**

I recently came across a statement I had scribbled down about engagement. It is worthy of passing along, I just wish I could remember who wrote it. Thus, my apologies to the author. It went something like this, “engagement should not be confused with quantifiable data from attendance, hits or ‘likes’... engagement is emotional, not transactional.”

I believe this to be true. I also believe that effective communication and engagement cannot be evaluated based on the loudest voice in the room. Nor should it be evaluated against awkward moments and “misses” while trying new strategies and unpredictable outcomes that force us to pause or alter our course. It is through commitment and sustained energy for communicating and engaging with people that we build meaningful relationships and in turn, trust.

The idea that public schools are “owned by the public,” becomes obvious when we put a resolution on the ballot and take it to the polls. If we've invested wisely in the legwork up front, the tally of support should come as no surprise. Making difficult decisions about taxpayer dollars in a silo, with a default of top-down authority, is a gamble. Never has this been more evident than it is today as we usher in a generation of

millennial parents. They bring an expectation of communication standards and levels of engagement that assume a collaborative decision-making process from district leadership.

As we consider referendum strategies to communicate and engage, we should be motivated by the opportunity to listen, learn and test our assumptions about community values. On Election Day, the ballot must be familiar and reflect engaged ownership for the process, as well as the solutions.

On Election Day, our goal is to eliminate surprises and anticipate success. ■

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