



Oregon School Boards Association

Learn from the Winners: Pendleton School District

Pendleton School District
ADM: 3,218
November 2013 Construction Bond: \$55 million
64.4% approval

Teamwork and patience pay off for Pendleton School District

To anyone with election experience, 64.4 percent approval of a finance measure is remarkable. A district that achieves those numbers may feel pleasantly surprised – emphasis on surprised. In the Pendleton School District, that final tally wasn't a shock. It matched their survey results almost exactly and confirmed that a comprehensive, methodical approach was the right one.

The district is in an undoubtedly supportive community. Pendleton School Board member and OSBA Vice-president Dave Krumbein said Pendleton has never lost a bond measure and was the first district in the state to pass a local option levy. But they don't take community support for granted.

"We had a lot of things going in our favor, but we still took the right steps," said Casey White-Zollman, communications director at InterMountain Education Service District (IMESD).

In Pendleton, those steps included a long timeline, a process that emphasized teamwork, high visibility and message consistency.

Don't rush the process

White-Zollman, who provides communication assistance to member districts in the IMESD service area, has extensive bond campaign experience. "Most often, districts will propose a bond measure with only six months to a year before the election," she said. "That doesn't leave enough time to determine actual needs and educate the public."

She said the ideal election calendar is three years. The discussion should start three years out, the needs should be identified and prioritized in year two, and the public should be well educated in the final year. "When you ask your voters to vote, they should know why and they should understand the needs," she said.

The possibility of a bond measure in Pendleton arose when the district started thinking about how to accommodate full-day kindergarten – about three years ago. At the same time, the district was revising its facility master plan. A community-based committee identified a growing list of problems with aging

buildings and infrastructure. The total cost estimate was about \$100 million. A second committee formed to narrow the list of projects for a potential bond measure to lower the costs to taxpayers.

This process was valuable because it involved community members, allowed a careful evaluation of district facilities and demonstrated due diligence to the public that the district asked the right questions and carefully researched the answers. The lengthy process to define the bond and educate the community resulted in a high level of awareness of the need and, for many, an eagerness to vote long before Election Day.

Gather your team

The district's team-building approach was unique. From the very beginning, they sought outside help. They had communications and facility assistance from IMESD, project management from a local contractor, architectural assistance, and engineering guidance from Krumbein, who had been an engineering professor at Blue Mountain Community College for more than 20 years.

The district recognized it didn't know everything, said White-Zollman. "Although there was an upfront cost, it was worth it," said Krumbein. "We relied on experts in their fields rather than trying to figure everything out."

In addition to the team of experts, there were highly engaged community members and staff who served on the political action committee (PAC). Other PAC members were part of the district's key communicator network, which had been informed throughout the process.

School board members were also heavily involved in the campaign, assisting with PAC activities and accompanying district administrators to community presentations. "The public needs to see board involvement," said Krumbein. "They are the ones who can say, 'vote yes'."

Be visible and stay on message

Information sharing was essential throughout the campaign. "One of the biggest mistakes districts make is assuming things that are obvious to school staff are obvious to people who are not in the schools," said White-Zollman.

For more than a year and a half, Superintendent Jon Peterson was the face of the bond. White-Zollman said he was completely dedicated to sharing information about the measure. "You have to have that or it won't work," she said. "That visibility is important, and it ensures the facts are consistent."

Peterson spoke anywhere and to anyone who requested a presentation – the chamber of commerce, city council, community groups, service clubs and school staff meetings. In almost all cases, he was joined by a board member or PAC representative who, unlike district staff, was not restricted from encouraging a yes vote.

He started every presentation with an IMESD-produced factual bond video that illustrated the needs and explained the measure. The video ensured that the message was consistent every time. Afterward, he took questions from the audience.

The video was also widely seen on the district website. White-Zollman said views spiked after a school board member mentioned the video link in a letter to the editor of the local newspaper.

Internal communications were another essential part of the communications plan. District administrators spoke to school staff to ensure that they were well informed and were able to share facts about the bond with parents in their schools and with their own personal networks.

Work hard and take advantage of lucky breaks

There were several lucky breaks along the way: a supportive community, a plan that maintained the current tax rate and didn't raise additional taxes, a visit to the district's early learning programs by Governor Kitzhaber that was covered in the newspaper, and even a rainy day during the video shoot, which perfectly illustrated the school's leaky roof.

A little luck never hurt, but Krumbein and White-Zollman said they didn't leave anything to chance. The successful bond measure was the result of a careful plan and extensive work. "We were asking for people's money. It's not something that should be taken lightly," said White-Zollman.