

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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For a couple of years the superintendent of the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation involved the staff and the community in strategic planning in order to develop a shared vision with a focus on achieving equity and excellence for all children. Although the process was not started in order to have a referendum, it resulted in significant buy-in from the community and eventually led to a recommendation that a referendum was needed.

Evansville is the third largest city in Indiana. The community referendum was overwhelmingly (70.1%) approved by Vanderburgh County voters (\$149 million) on November 8, 2008.

A significant reason for the success was the shared vision. There was a consistent message that accomplishing the strategic plans would result in the following community improvements: 1. Economic growth, 2. Workforce development, and 3. Quality of life. The strategic plans focused on growth and progress as opposed to consequences leading to failure. In other words, we explored, "How do we have a better community?"

Providing information and open communication was a constant. There was transparency and trust, not just "data," but "information." It was important to listen to people, to learn from the exchange of information and to make appropriate adjustments.

Developing strategic partnerships was a high priority, and the community, especially the business community, noticed and appreciated the effort. The purpose was to build human and financial capacity. As indicated in the book *Dig Your Well Before You're Thirsty*, there was a conscious effort to determine what the staff needed to do prior to making requests of the community. Important networking and partnership developing strategies are presented below.

1. Developing a strong relationship with the media is vital. Hold monthly meetings, through which you create transparency and trust. It was suggested that the administration not "spin" things.
2. We held over 400 forums throughout the community. Some of those were at midnight, in order to accommodate alternative schedules. During the early forums dealing with the strategic planning strategies, a referendum was never discussed. The purpose of the forums was to seek input and acknowledgement of the plans.
3. We met with our internal groups.
4. A Business Council was established and met quarterly. Do this prior to ever needing a referendum. After the referendum, our Business Council continued to be supportive. The Council purchased a billboard that said, "When we work together, we all succeed;" it was posted in Evansville as well as at a hosted reception honoring teachers.
5. The superintendent organized a Labor Council, which also met quarterly. This group continues to be very supportive.
6. Catholic, private and charter schools were considered partners with the school corporation. Meetings with representatives from these schools were held on a regular basis. Instead of seeing the other schools in the community as competition, we stressed the importance of all schools to provide a quality education. As an example, to demonstrate the partnership, the school corporation no longer charged the other schools for using athletic facilities. The rationale is that the facilities belong to the community.

7. One very successful partnership was the Center for Family, School and Community Partnerships. A local bank provided the facility where several social services were located to accommodate community needs. Once student needs were identified, there was an ability to find services quickly and in one location.

8. Efficiency and effectiveness became a common goal. The public is interested in knowing how a school corporation spends its funds. A total of eight million dollars was cut in December 2009. Large inventory of supplies were eliminated and "just in time" delivery was initiated. Currently, the board is selling several buildings, including the central office. They looked for technological solutions. One example of a visible partnership is that the school corporation assisted local businesses in a cooperative purchasing process. One business eliminated two purchasing agents. The city reduced their headcount from four full-time purchasing agents to one. Focusing on "Lean Processes," several staff members have enrolled in a Masters of Business Operational Excellence program from Ohio State in an effort to maximize the school corporation's resources.

9. The networking that occurred and the partnerships developed resulted in more than 30 organizations endorsing the referendum. There was strong support from the community.

10. Approximately \$125,000 was spent for the referendum campaign. However, over \$450,000 was pledged, had additional funds been needed.

11. School board members were involved, including attending forums. Having a strong board that has members respected in the community is a great asset.

12. As indicated above, early on the administration and school board members scheduled forums to discuss the strategic plan. The plans were presented beginning in December and changes were made in March, after the community engagement process.

13. It is important to continue to evaluate the strategic plan and include this information in reports to the community, i.e., annual reports.

14. The process involved planning, aligning, collaborating, reflecting, communicating, listening, securing approval, and executing. To accomplish the strategic plans, referendum funds and capital funds were utilized.

It is important to emphasize that the referendum was perceived as a community referendum, not a school administration plan. The EVSC superintendent and school board went to the community with strategic plans. Very little of it had to do with facilities. Most of it had to do with early childhood education, technology, efficiency, effectiveness, etc.

The referendum process is a political process, not an educational process. When going into a referendum, it is important to have a well-organized plan. It is also important that the referendum be community driven and that committee members be passionate. However, prior to the referendum, every superintendent needs to build a community connection. Superintendents must go to their communities to build support. Networking and developing partnership are now a significant part of a superintendent's job responsibilities. The only way to have a successful referendum is through collaboration and community engagement activities.