

DehlerPR sparks community connections

New London Spicer Schools wins with a robust pre-referendum communications and community engagement strategy

Challenge

With no operating levy and a failed 2020 referendum, New London-Spicer School District was at a financial crossroads. Without additional revenue, the district was tasked with making significant budget reductions of \$1.2 million to the general fund for the 2021-2022 school year and additional cuts for the 2022-2023 school year – a significant impact on the district, its staff and students. **The district contacted DehlerPR to provide strategic expertise prior to introducing a November 2021 operating referendum.**

In the face of this tough financial situation the district needed to make positive connections and assess the needs and priorities of the community through information and community engagement campaigns.

- The primary goal of the **information campaign** was to clearly communicate to voters within the district the impact of a “Yes” vote or “No” vote on the school district’s educational operations.
- The goal of the pre-referendum **community engagement campaign** was to educate and seek opinions and advice from key community members/opinion leaders on school finance and district’s financial situation.

DehlerPR was able to quickly make connections with our board and with me. In turn, those connections extended and were strengthened in the community, where we were able to learn more about their needs, what was acceptable, and what we needed to do to craft a passing referendum.

Bill Adams, New London-Spicer Superintendent



NEW LONDON-SPICER SCHOOL DISTRICT

- Serves communities of New London and Spicer
- Around 1,500 students, pre-K through 12th grade; recent growth in enrollment in part from students open-enrolling
- Close-knit communities with participation from parents and community members in district events
- Both cities lean conservative politically, having voted Republican in the last several presidential elections, though by sometimes slim margins

Solution

In consultation with DehlerPR on strategic messaging, Superintendent Bill Adams presented the State of the District to stakeholder groups including employees, parents, the community at large, as well an eleven-member Community Task Force, many of whom were likely “no” voters in the last election. The district’s outreach through an array of communication vehicles and consistent messaging reinforced Adams’ State of the District and the need for stakeholders to participate in a solution that would be viable at the polls.

Results

The upfront work for the 2021 referendum questions paid off. The district crafted two referendum questions for voters to consider, the first, which passed, asked for an increase of \$1,020 per student to provide revenue for everyday operations including teaching and learning, programming, and student supports. The second question asked for inflation increases for the operating levy and ultimately didn’t pass.

Despite the mixed results, Superintendent Adams was pleased, noting, “The voter approved operating levy will allow our district to continuously improve and build upon our past success.” The connections made with the community in the pre-referendum phase have created a strong foundation upon which the district can build a solid future.



DehlerPR works with schools to develop unique campaign themes, such as New London-Spicer’s theme: Investing In Our Future



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DELIVERABLES

- Strategic plan
- Strategic counsel
- Post referendum survey
- Meeting agendas and materials
- Support and strategic messaging for superintendent and staff at events and meetings
- Reports after each engagement section
- Phone interviews with opinion leaders
- Electronic and traditional communication
- Media Relations (news releases and editorial guest columns)



Information about community meetings was advertised and communicated in the district’s eNewsletters, website announcements, news releases, advertisements, social media events and posts, text messages, backpack fliers, and postcard mailings to all district residences.