

## Case Study: *Benton Community School Corporation* **Looking Forward with a Plan**

How DehlerPR collaborated with school administrators and community leaders to inform and engage a rural school corporation facing a budgetary crisis and set the stage for referendum success.

### **Challenge:**

Benton Community School Corporation offers strong and varied academic programs, including a wide array of AP courses, particularly for a small, rural district. In recent years, however, unfavorable changes in state aid combined with an unexpected enrollment decline for three consecutive years put BCSC on the brink of unsustainable annual budget deficits. Without residents' approval of an operating levy, BCSC would have no choice but to enact immediate staff and program cuts, resulting in larger class sizes, fewer academic options and perhaps triggering additional enrollment losses.

### **Goal:**

Engage community members to educate them on the financial situation, and seek their opinions on the best possible solutions. Then, educate all school district residents on the outcomes of a yes or no vote on an operating levy. Guide a citizen-led Political Action Committee to conduct targeted communication and voter identification and get-out-the-vote strategies.



**Referendum Postcard**

### **Solution:**

DehlerPR, working closely with school administrators, set the strategy for community engagement and marketing and communications to help Benton tell its referendum story. BCSC assembled a dynamic Financial Advisory Committee, whose members played a key role in explaining, as trusted local voices, the district's financial realities to the broader community. DehlerPR worked closely with administrators in implementing well-attended community engagement sessions strategically located at each district school.

### **CLIENT:**

Benton Community School Corporation (BCSC) is a hidden jewel K-12 district - often overshadowed in public perception by nearby West Lafayette schools - with three elementary schools and one junior/senior high school serving about 1,700 students. BCSC covers most of Benton County, Indiana, along with small pockets of Tippecanoe and Warren counties. The district is largely rural and agricultural; towns include Fowler, Otterbein, Boswell and Oxford. The district has mixed income levels; about 48 percent of students qualify for free lunch. The student population is about 89% white and 9% Hispanic. Students perform at or near state averages on standardized test scores.



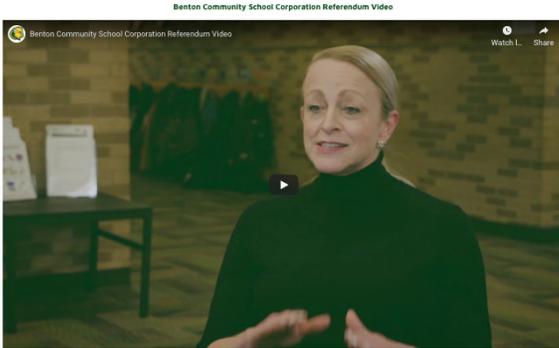
### **DELIVERABLES:**

- Strategic communications plan
- Strategic counsel
- Key messaging
- Assistance on planning and conducting community engagement
- Talking points
- Leave-behinds
- Frequently Asked Questions
- News releases
- Video script and direction
- e-Newsletters
- Postcards
- Website content

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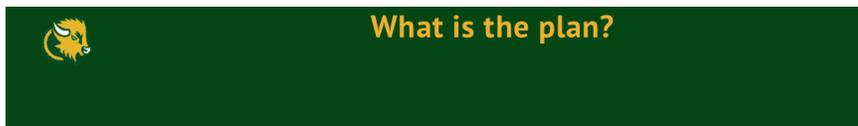
participation at every step of this process. Students in our district will benefit from this investment for years. Thank you for your support.



Referendum Video

### Results:

The vote, originally scheduled for May 2, 2020, was rescheduled to June 2 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The work of DehlerPR and community leaders set the stage for a successful referendum: BCSC residents approved the operating levy with a 55.5-percent yes vote.



The three-part plan is to:

1. Reduce expenses by reducing staff through attrition and continuing to improve efficiency, such as through energy savings upgrades
2. Create Long Range Planning Committee to develop a district plan to address declining enrollment
3. Increase revenue through an Operating Levy Referendum

#### About a referendum

A referendum election will be held June 2, 2020. If voters approve this referendum, Benton Community School Corporation will use the additional revenue to erase the current structural deficit (roughly \$2 million this year) and fund existing class sizes, programs and staffing levels while stabilizing the budget.

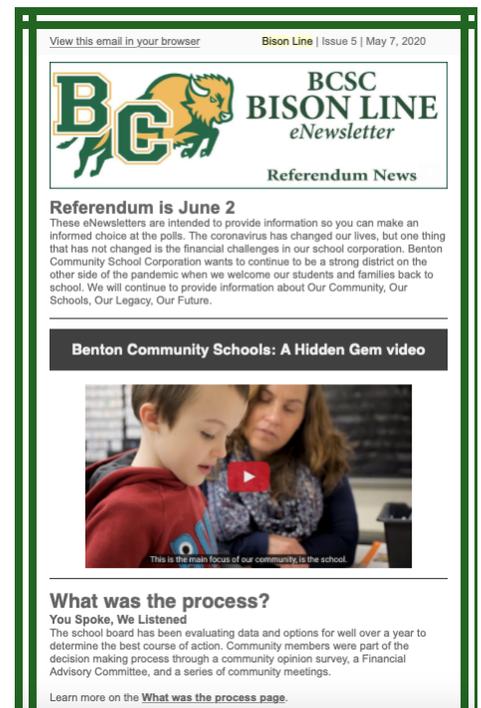
#### Referendum website

**We're not alone.**  
Our neighbors in West Lafayette, Tri-County and Frontier have all recently approved operating levy referendums.



### Solution continued:

The solution included compelling video and a comprehensive website presence featuring details on every angle and a continually updated FAQ to answer each new question as it arose. Postcards and e-newsletters were instrumental in informing the entire community of BCSC financial challenges. A video featuring community members speaking in support of the operating levy was produced and distributed. Plans to make community presentations were disrupted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.



eNewsletter

*"The DehlerPR team was a great asset to our operating levy campaign. Our financial circumstances were dire, our community is mostly farms, and the COVID-19 pandemic delayed our election by a month, adding additional uncertainty. I was very relieved when our referendum passed and I know that our school corporation is in better shape because of it. The DehlerPR team helped us to engage with our community and make a meaningful case for our district. I was impressed with the entire process, and grateful for the guidance we received throughout. It was well worth the investment."*

*Tracy Albertson | Director of Finance/Treasurer, Benton Community School Corporation*



Educate. Communicate. Motivate.

DehlerPR helps public school districts maintain and improve their reputation by telling their story and building relationships. As a virtual agency, our group brings clients more value by providing years of experience with high-quality expertise and low overhead. We communicate to educate audiences and motivate them to take action.