



2024 NSPRA COMMUNICATIONS AWARDS

Gold Medallion Entry - Bond/Finance Campaigns

Educational Service District 112 Communications - Vancouver, Washington

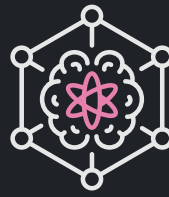
Educational Service District for Southwest Washington

Communications Department - 11 team members

Entry Title: Using Research & Strategy for 17 Funding Campaigns to Achieve a 94% Success Rate

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SYNOPSIS



ESD 112
COMMUNICATIONS

BOND/FINANCE CAMPAIGNS

WE ARE A COMMUNICATIONS TEAM at Educational Service District (ESD) 112, one of nine agencies mandated by our legislature to serve Southwest Washington school districts. We partner across the state to equalize educational opportunities for all learners. ESD 112 is an essential part of state and regional services for school districts.

Each year, our team supports numerous school district funding campaigns, most of which are for the November general election or the February special election. One year we supported 18 campaigns!

In 2023, 13 school districts contacted us for support with their communications strategy and materials for the February 2024 special election. Several of them had multiple measures on the ballot. As always, the stakes were high, as levy funds account for about 10-15% of school districts' overall budgets, and districts must pass a bond to build a new school or make significant school improvements.

THE CHALLENGE

The pandemic and increasing political polarization have put schools at the forefront of culture wars that have adversely affected community support for school funding measures. School bond measures in Washington require a 60% supermajority to pass, and only **six passed in 2021-2023 (out of 39)**. Similarly, we have recently seen basic levy renewals, which usually passed the required simple majority threshold easily, fail. In addition, the Public Disclosure Commission (PDC), which regulates elections in the state, cracked down on the tactics of two school districts during recent elections, and concerns were rippling throughout districts across Washington. Our district partners were rightfully concerned about passing the funding measures they rely on, while keeping their campaigns PDC compliant.

OUR APPROACH & RESULTS

Our team researched the recent PDC cases and took action to provide information on best practices and compliance to all districts in our region. For the districts that engaged us for campaign support, we provided campaign recommendations, strategies, and PDC-compliant materials tailored to each community's unique initiatives. **This concentrated effort supported 16 out of 17 total initiatives passing, including a bond in Bremerton—one of only seven bonds to pass statewide in the February 2024 election.**

OUR DISTRICT PARTNERS





By the beginning of 2023, it was clear that school election measures (levies and bonds) were becoming increasingly difficult to pass in Washington for a variety of complicated reasons. Our team recognized that our 2024 elections approach couldn't reflect typical past practices and the way election communications had been tackled for many years. The school funding landscape and sentiments about public education had changed, and we needed to change our practices, too. We had to ensure we were providing districts that we were supporting with the best strategic communications guidance and materials, and as such, we dug into research well ahead of the next big election season.

Our research included weekly content analysis to understand the current situation, and later a review of election results databases to compare recent election results to those over the past 20 years. We needed to better understand historical information to determine how our current challenges compared to those that schools may have experienced in the past. Our executive director worked with public finance investment bank leaders to gather information and school election statistics. We learned that, indeed, the landscape for passing a school finance bond in Washington State was extremely challenging and appeared to be getting worse.

As part of the research into election outcomes over a 20-year period, we learned of two recent enforcements by the Public Disclosure Commission (PDC), a practice that was unusual for most school elections. The PDC had recently fined both [Highline](#) and [Kennewick School Districts](#) for election communications violations (use of "emotional language," more "frequent information on how to vote" than in a non-election year," and "promotional or persuasive content"). In addition to getting fined, Highline was caught up in a PDC investigation that delayed the sale of their bond funds and held up the start of planning/construction for their successful bond measure. By many accounts, the communications practices of Highline and Kennewick School Districts were not out of the ordinary, which created concern and fear in the state-wide K-12 community.

The ESD 112 team found and examined the [PDC findings](#) to better understand what had changed to create this recent enforcement. Our executive director met with school elections attorneys who litigated the case and the district communications lead at Highline. The team also reviewed past [PDC guidelines](#) to better understand what was considered a violation.

Additionally, our team met with the communications leads who managed the communications for the only bond to pass in the state in the February 2023 election ([Pasco School District](#)) to review their materials and better understand their tactics. This research allowed us to better understand the challenges that school districts faced and consider strategies and tactics that were effective, while still compliant.

Research Findings:

- Q Washington is one of only a handful of states to require a supermajority vote to pass a bond election (60% approval). Over the past 20 years, the overall average "yes" vote for school elections in Washington has never reached the required 60% supermajority.
- Q Bonds across the state were failing at an alarming rate and as such, schools were not putting the measures on the ballot even though school facilities desperately needed to be modernized. For example, in 1992, there were 85 bond measures on the ballot state-wide with about 44% of those measures passing (not great); in contrast, in 2021 there were 0 measures put on the ballot. In 2023, 20 measures appeared on the ballot and only 2 of them passed (10%).
- Q Levies, which require only a 50% +1 simple majority approval rate, were also failing at an alarming rate: Between 2021 and 2023, 29 EP&O levies failed, which was unheard of before the pandemic. In fact, EP&O levy approval percentage rates were lower between 2021 and 2023 than they were during the 2008 recession.



WHEN WE FELT CONFIDENT THAT WE HAD THE MOST UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION about the state of bond and levy funding measures in Washington and could offer informed, strategic advice about what we knew to be effective and compliant strategies and tactics, we moved into planning for the February 2024 election.

GOAL

ESD 112's Communications & Public Engagement Team is the trusted leader for strategic and compliant school election communications support, and as such:

- The team will use research and data to guide best practice recommendations for districts to support them in successful election outcomes.
- School districts will continue to feel confident in their decision to partner with ESD 112 Communications and know that the team is armed with current information to understand current issues and strategies to address them..

IDENTIFIED AUDIENCE/PUBLICS

- Returning and new clients:
 - » School leaders (superintendents and finance directors)
 - » School communications professionals

MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

1. **PDC Compliance:** Receive 0 PDC findings for 100% of clients by the time February 2024 election results are certified.
2. **Passage Rate:** Increase the number of bond/levy measures approved by 15% as compared to the February 2023 district partner results by the end of February 2024 when the elections are certified.

STRATEGIES & TACTICS

Our overall strategy for meeting our measurable objectives was to think more strategically about the election season.

1. **Educate:** Compile and share our research findings with our region's communicators and superintendents. Invite them to share their own strategies to codify current best practices
2. **Communicate:** Talk about funding measure strategy early and often with clients and our own staff through meetings, emails and our newsletter/blog
3. **Streamline:** Organize our client campaigns in a spreadsheet and minimize the number of staff working on campaigns, creating bond and levy "experts" for maximum efficiency
4. **Prioritize High Stakes Work:** Prioritize our work for the February election campaigns above less urgent work

Strategies: Educate & Communicate

Tactics:

- Informative email reminders
- Comparison of pre and post-pandemic election practices
- PDC information presentation
- Informational "expert" interview and blog post

Our executive director sent an email to our region's superintendents sharing PDC insights and encouraging them to start planning early.

She also held a meeting with the region's communications leads and our team to brainstorm and gather resources about [bond and levy best practices](#), as well as some of the tried and true strategies and tactics that districts have used and how we may need to [adapt these practices post-pandemic](#).

This research was put together into [a presentation](#)



that was shared with the communications professionals, superintendents, and districts that contract with ESD 112 to inform them of recent PDC findings and demonstrate our expertise in election communications strategy and compliance.

ESD 112 Communications has a blog for informative articles and interviews related to school communication, and we send an e-newsletter bimonthly to school communicators, superintendents and others. We [published an interview](#) with one of our team's "experts" about school funding communications and sent this article in our [October newsletter](#).

Strategies: Streamline & Prioritize

Tactics:

- Create a tracking spreadsheet
- Assign staff "experts" to primarily manage and execute the work
- Be proactive and begin work early to manage the workload
- Use the support of our entire team to take non-bond and levy work off the "experts" plates

As part of our internal planning process, we created a [spreadsheet](#) with basic information about each school district's election measures and the point people assigned to the various aspects of each campaign.

With a topic as complicated as school funding campaigns, we chose to limit the number of staff on our team assigned to this important work. Taking a "staff expert" approach created greater efficiency, as we could take valuable insight from one campaign and apply it to another. Our districts appreciated the broad perspective and depth of experience we could bring to their strategic communications efforts.

Helping our district partners communicate about funding measures is arguably the most important work we do. Consequently, our staff prioritized work on bond and levy campaigns above their other

work. To facilitate this, we started working with some districts on their campaigns as early as nine months before the February 2024 election, and we were proactive about contacting them early about their plans. This helped ensure that not all the work came flooding in at once. Additionally, those team members who were not actively working on the bond and levy campaigns provided support by taking other work off the "experts" plates, so that we could ensure we were still meeting all our districts' needs..

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

OUR "EXPERTS":

Monique Dugaw

Executive Director of Communications

- Meet with districts regularly to ensure needs are being met
- Strategize communications plan with client
- Develop content and write copy
- Monitor contract hours billed
- Review all materials for accuracy and PDC compliance

Melissa Burt

Senior Graphic Designer & Content Strategist

- Attend initial client meetings to learn about needs and help strategize approach
- Provide guidance to districts and internal staff on PDC regulations
- Write informative blog post and send newsletter
- Design all materials requested, including Powerpoint presentations, web and social media graphics, handouts, mailers, postcards, signs and banners and more.
- Art direct and write scripts for videos

SUPPORT TEAM:

Justine Hanrahan - social media

Mika Yoshida - project management

Heidi Barnes - design support

Fred Gunnerson - video & animation

Xander Hayes - video & animation

IMPLEMENTATION



WE BEGAN BY MEETING INDIVIDUALLY with each district client to gather basic information about the initiatives, better understand the community’s perceived strengths and potential challenges, and learn where there might be communication opportunities.. For each campaign, we created a shared Google workspace where we could exchange information and photos and save text outlines.

In the past, school districts relied on our team mostly for levy informational mailers or handouts, but this time around, school districts needed support for their entire educational campaigns, from start to finish.

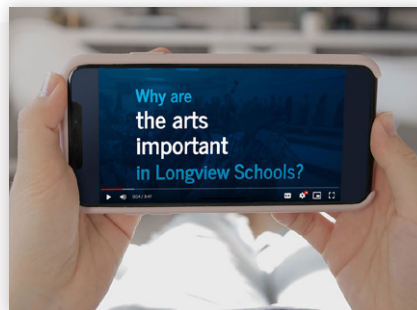
For each district, we outlined key messaging—information that would later be used for district materials. This messaging was reviewed for accuracy, clarity, and tone by the district’s communications staff (if they had communication staff), the superintendent, and the chief financial officer. From there, we created presentations, web and social media graphics, videos, and print materials, as desired by the district.

We pride ourselves on tailoring our services to the needs of our districts, so the implementation of each campaign followed our districts’ needs, based on their staff capacity and budget. Here are three examples of campaigns we worked with district partners to implement:



Bremerton School District contracts with us for communications and design support, but they initially had a contract with another entity for their bond and levy campaign. After they were dissatisfied with the materials and support they received, they ended their contract with the firm in August to work with us to handle their informational campaign instead.

[VIEW CAMPAIGN >](#)



Longview Public Schools has a graphic designer on staff, so they requested that we create a handout and graphics as a jumping-off point for their designer to modify as needed. They also post a lot of social media videos as a general communication strategy, and they asked us for help to create videos for their levy campaign.

[VIEW CAMPAIGN >](#)



Yakima School District has a communications and translation team for their bilingual district, but they contract with us for strategic communications and design work. For their levy campaign, we consulted on strategy and designed all the materials, including a mailer and handout in two languages, billboards and theater ads.

[VIEW CAMPAIGN >](#)



BEING MORE STRATEGIC ABOUT OUR APPROACH to the February 2024 election and establishing objectives for ourselves allowed for a greater understanding of the outcome as we evaluated the election results.

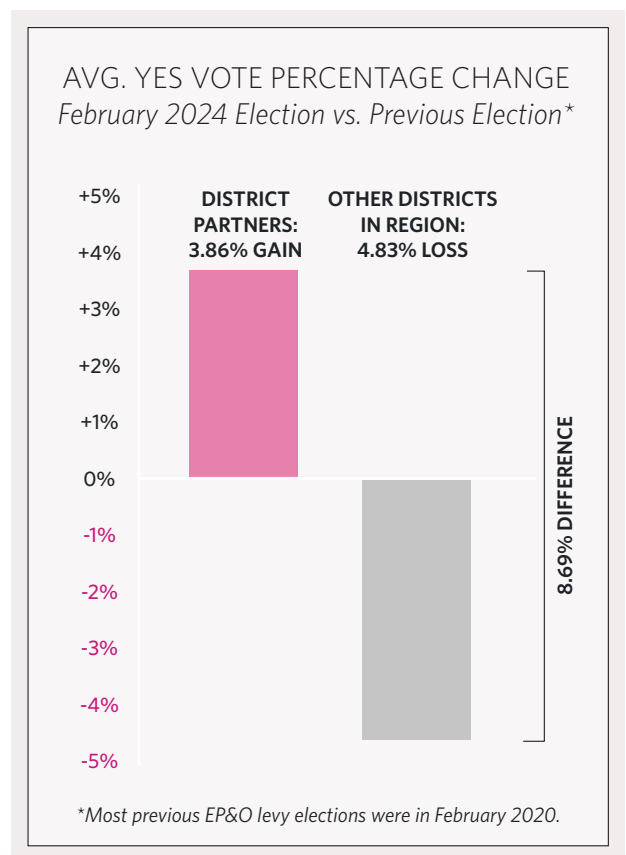
Our two objectives were:

- 1. PDC Compliance:** Receive 0 PDC findings for 100% of clients by the end of February 2024 when the elections are certified.
- 2. Passage Rate:** Increase the number of bond/levy measures approved by 15% as compared to the February 2023 district partner results by the end of February 2024 when the elections are certified.

We exceeded expectations for both objectives: Our clients received zero PDC findings (and zero complaints), and we increased the number of measures approved by 21% over the February 2023 election (94.11% passage rate in 2024, as compared to 77.77% in 2023).

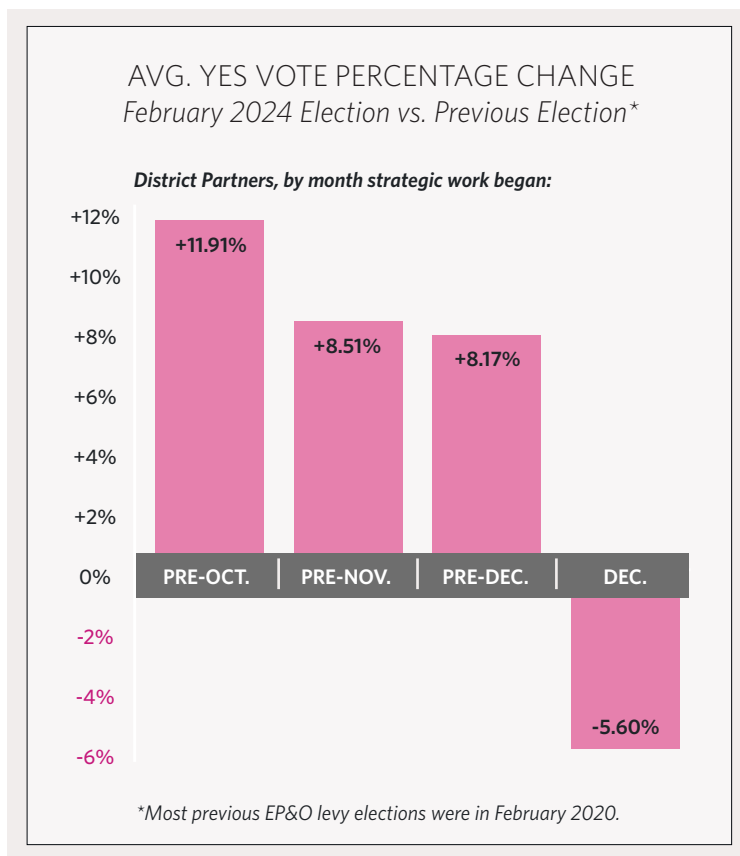
While we were calculating the passage rates, we decided that we wanted to take our evaluation of the election results a step further. We wanted to establish an evaluation method that compared apples to apples, since those districts with measures in the 2024 election were different than those in 2023. We decided to look back to our 2024 district partners' most recent previous election results and compare the percentage of "yes" votes to the 2024 results. As a control, we did the same with other districts in our region that we did not work with. For our clients, we then noted whether or not they were a new client, whether or not we employed a new strategy, and finally when we started strategizing the campaign with them.

The results were illuminating. The districts we worked with saw an average increase in their yes votes from their previous election by 3.86%. This number might not seem very large, but when considering that, in most cases, the most recent previous election was pre-pandemic, we were very pleased with the positive direction. Additionally, a 3.86% increase in "yes" votes can make a big difference, especially when considering a supermajority requirement. We asked ourselves: *Did our strategic planning make a difference, or is public sentiment post-pandemic improving?* Then we calculated the change in approval rating for the seven districts in our region that we did not work with for their levy renewals; the average change in yes votes for those districts was a decrease of 4.83%. **The strategic approach we took with our clients made a positive difference of 8.69%.** (See graph.)





Diving deeper into our district partner data, we didn't find enough of a correlation between whether or not districts were new to us or employing new strategies to come to any conclusions in that area. There were too many other variables, such as the particular challenges within the district or whether or not a citizens' committee was active. However, when we analyzed our districts' results and looked at when we started working with them strategically, the results were startling (see graph). Those clients of ours who started strategic work with us in September or earlier (six to nine months before the election) saw an average **increase in yes votes of an incredible 11.91%** over their previous election. Conversely, those clients who waited until December (the last minute—only two months before the election) to work with us saw an **average decrease in yes votes of 5.6%** from their previous election.



Calculating the difference in approval percentages between elections proved to be a truly eye-opening metric for our evaluation process and one that we plan to continue for future elections. We have already started sharing this data with district partners and our regional communications group. The statistics about the start date of the work will make it that much easier to convince potential clients of something that we have been telling them all along: Talking about school funding should happen early and often as a part of normal, year-round district communication practices, and even the most experienced and knowledgeable communications team cannot move the meter much in just a couple short months before an election. Passing funding measures takes strategic thinking, significant communications support, and lots of lead time—and now we have the data to support it.



As always, your team was amazing! We could not have been more pleased with your support throughout the entire levy campaign/measure. You played a critical role in providing our stakeholders with accurate and timely information. This undoubtedly played a major role in the community response and overwhelming support for the levy. Thank you!



–Glen Johnson, *Superintendent*
CASHMERE SCHOOL DISTRICT



SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Research:

- [2023 Piper Sandler Election Statistics](#)
- [113641 Highline SD 401 SOU Dismissal Reminder Letter](#)
- [NEWESD 101 Levies and Bonds: Facts, Trends and Strategies to Advocate and Communicate with Taxpayers](#)
- [Public Disclosure Commission Memorandums](#)

Planning:

- [February 2024 Bond & Levy Planning Spreadsheet](#)
- [Bonds & Levies Post-Pandemic Presentation](#)
- [Telling Your School Funding Story Interview](#)
- [October E-Newsletter](#)

Implementation:

- [Bremerton School District February 2024 Bond & Levy Outreach](#)
- [Longview Public Schools 2024 Levy Handout and Social Media Videos](#)
- [Yakima School District 2024 Replacement Levy Materials](#)

Evaluation:

- [Bond and Levy Results Analysis Spreadsheet](#)



You really helped us rise above the tight timeline and execute our plan at a very high level. I appreciated how well our teams were able to work together, from branding the top 10 fact cards seamlessly to producing engaging videos. Your social media roadmap boosted our engagement rate by reach and expanded our presence on Facebook and Instagram. Most importantly, your work will benefit all of our students and staff for many years. We are so very grateful for each of you.

–Amanda Richter, *Director of Communications & Community Engagement*
BATTLE GROUND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

