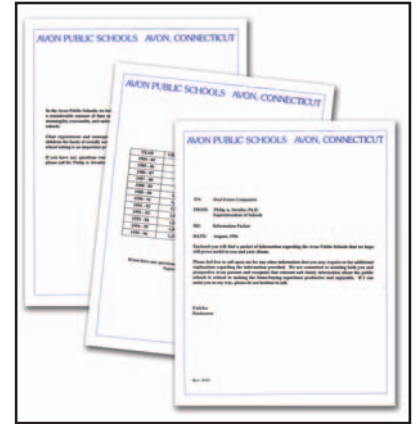


Avon Public Schools



Challenge:

Voters in a middle- and upper-middle class community, divided over school spending issues, defeated the initial attempt to pass a \$22 million high school renovation project. During the 11 years prior to the high school renovation proposal, residents and the Town Council had defeated 26 of 29 requests for improvements to school facilities. Poor communication, a politically divided school board, and an extremely active anti-spending group contributed to the town's general distrust and apparent indifference related to school improvement issues. After more than a decade of delay, the district received notification that the high school would lose its accreditation if improvements outlined in a renovation request were not completed in a timely manner.

Solution:

First Experience Communications (FEC) researched, planned and executed a fact-based, grassroots community relations campaign to change public opinion.

Research – Through analysis of previous budget requests, an examination of the demographic and socioeconomic factors, and informal interviews with key stakeholders (parents, students, board members), FEC identified major issues and audiences.

Planning and Execution – Key audiences were targeted beginning with the revitalization of a “citizens for education” group to assist in reaching the community. FEC worked with group leaders to create a series of informational meetings at each school to serve as forums to expose parents’ and residents’ concerns and promote a better overall understanding of the benefits of the project. Communicating the possible loss of accreditation gained attention and promoted a sense of urgency for moving forward with the project. A follow-up newsletter from the board was created to specifically address issues raised at meetings. FEC also created presentations for the board Chair and Superintendent to use at meetings with other interested/affected groups.

Results:

The town forum meetings were well attended. One meeting at the high school attracted 700 residents, who toured the facility to examine physical deteriorations, first-hand. In a record-breaking turnout – over 53% of the town’s registered voters participated versus 32% for the first referendum – the \$17 million base plan was approved. The long-term effects of the high school referendum campaign were evident via changes in the Board of Education’s organizational plan and the community’s sustained interest in educational issues. The board committed resources to a long-term communications plan and created a standing committee dedicated to improving communications with residents. With a clearer understanding of their respective roles, the board Chair (as a communications leader) and the Superintendent of Schools continued to embrace the models they implemented during the referendum as part of their everyday management functions.