



West Plains School District

in Missouri



Meaningful engagement creates support for new high school

Lessons learned from West Plains School District's facilities Thoughtexchange

West Plains School District needed more space for its students. Among the possibilities it was exploring was the building of a new high school - a project that would serve not only West Plains, but its neighboring communities as well. The District hoped to engage the community to better understand their priorities and use that information to help inform a tax levy proposal.

"We believe that any time we want to make a decision such as this we really have to hear what our community wants us to do," says Dr. Mulford Superintendent of West Plains Schools. To do so, he and his team used Thoughtexchange to reach as many people as possible, which not only affirmed their efforts, but also allowed West Plains to bring their final proposal to the ballot more quickly.

501 participants

1,372 thoughts

27,833 stars

27,833 stars
participants

1,372 thoughts

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Revaluating engagement strategies

West Plains past engagement efforts included a phone poll of 400 community members. “We received some reasonable feedback, but at the same time it was from a really small poll, and it wasn’t what we were really going for in the end,” says Dr. Mulford.

The District needed broader input on priorities and a sense of community sentiment.

“Thoughtexchange fit with what we were wanting to accomplish and it has worked out really well for us,” says Dr. Mulford of his decision to partner with Thoughtexchange.

Lana Snodgras, West Plains’ Director of Communications for the last six years admits she was a little reluctant to try Thoughtexchange at first. “I thought I could use my own survey tools to figure this out. But honestly, once I got going, I realized this is a greater project than I wanted to tackle alone and was very grateful to have Thoughtexchange there supporting me as we continued down that path.”

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LANA SNODGRAS, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, WEST PLAINS SCHOOL DISTRICT

Discovering shared priorities

By connecting more meaningfully, and with more people than they had ever been able to before, Dr. Mulford and his team discovered that the community had a greater appreciation for the space needs than they had realized.

“I think it gave an opportunity for people who didn’t necessarily feel like they had a voice to speak. The overcrowding at our elementary is ultimately why we are doing this tax levy, and it was nice to see that our parents and community members realized that as well,” says Dr. Mulford.

Other community priorities were also closely aligned with the District's. For example, Dr. Mulford and his team hoped to create a performing arts facility with the tax levy, and felt reassured when thoughts like *West Plains is in great need of a theatre/music venue for the high school* emerged among the most valued thoughts in the process.

The results also surfaced some opportunities for “quick-wins” in addressing concerns about the atmosphere at the current facilities. Dr. Mulford and his team were able to learn about these concerns, work through solutions, and resolve them quickly. “It really clarified what we were thinking already, and allowed us to take the key findings from our Thoughtexchange and actually apply them to some of the things we were already wanting to do,” he adds.

Informing the ballot

Using what they learned from their first Thoughtexchange, West Plains drafted two potential tax levy proposals and presented them to the community through a second Thoughtexchange. One scenario proposed the building of a new senior high school that would alleviate all of West Plains' classroom space needs, for all of its buildings, district wide. The second proposed building on to West Plains' elementary level facilities.

Interestingly, the results revealed broad support for the new high school despite the lack of support for such initiatives in the past. This affirmed for Dr. Mulford and his team that authentic consultation was crucial for community buy-in.



West Plains Schools

West Plains School District strives to employ both world-class strategies and local values to provide a safe, enriching environment for faculty, staff, and students of all ages. They provide students with opportunities for a variety of experiences that will assist them in the discovery and development of their strengths for a lifetime of success and service to the community.

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To be absolutely sure that they were heading in the right direction, West Plains carried out an additional five open forums in an effort to verify what they had learned in their second Thoughtexchange. At each of the events, Dr. Mulford presented the same two levy proposal options, as well as the option to do nothing. An overwhelming majority – 92 out of 100 participants – confirmed that they would support the building of a new senior high school when they go to the ballot in April 2016.

Dr. Mulford and his team are hopeful that the community insight that informed their proposal, and the support they've received thus far, will help them at the polls in April. "I think our community very much appreciates that we've gone to them and asked," says Dr. Mulford. "And, trust has been built because we've been having the conversation together since January."

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DR. JOHN MULFORD
SUPERINTENDENT, WEST PLAINS SCHOOLS



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