Passing a first-ever bond with 80% support by discovering key community priorities

As a student-first public school district that operates 15 schools, South Carolina's Spartanburg County School District Two (SCSD2) prides itself on consistently connecting with its constituents to learn what matters most before taking action.

With that goal in mind, SCSD2 Superintendent Dr. Scott Mercer and his team sought a solution that would exceed the results they got from traditional engagement methods. They partnered with Thoughtexchange to run a Weather Report that let the whole community respond to open-ended questions about what the district was doing well, and where it could improve.

While Dr. Mercer initially had concerns about letting people share whatever was on their minds, the results revealed it was a good decision.

"I was as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof. There's always going to be somebody out there that thinks the superintendent is not a very good leader. However, when I faced the Discover Step and read all the thoughts and saw the themes that rose to the top, it was one of the most personally gratifying experiences I'd ever had," he explains. "We got some good recognition of things that we work hard on, and we also learned some things that were a bit harder to hear - but it's our responsibility to act on those."

A focus on facilities funding

A key insight Dr. Mercer and his team gained from the Weather Report analysis was that the district's main high school was no longer meeting the growing community's needs. To act on the community's facility feedback, SCSD2 needed to pass a bond referendum. And that would be no easy task.

"What's interesting about our bond process was it was not only the first time that I as a superintendent had ever been in charge of getting a bond referendum passed, it was the first one in the history of our district, which has been in existence since the 1950s," Dr. Mercer notes.

As he and his team prepared to take on the challenge of running a $120-million bond referendum campaign, SCSD2 worked with Thoughtexchange again to learn what mattered most to the community.

I can promise you that the results we got from Thoughtexchange were so insightful and helpful to us that we were able to take it and run with it. The return on that investment has just been incalculable, and I would not want to trade what we have received for anything. It's been priceless.

Dr. Scott Mercer, Superintendent

CHALLENGE

- Prepare a bond package that would allow the district and superintendent to pass a first-ever referendum in a state where bonds are frequently unsuccessful

- Earn constituent trust and generate $120 million in funding to address important facilities needs

SOLUTION

- A Weather Report exchange that let the community freely share what mattered most and revealed the need to focus on facilities

- A Facilities Scenario exchange that allowed open, prioritized community feedback on two bond packages

- Rich data and advanced analytics that quickly revealed the most important insights

RESULTS

- A bond package built around key community priorities and backed by trust created through open, transparent communication

- 80% support for a first-ever referendum on a $120-million bond package

Discovering surprising priorities

SCSD2 drafted two bond proposals around a new high school based on community priorities. Then the Thoughtexchange team helped launch a Facilities Scenarios exchange that let the community confidentially share and rate thoughts from any device.

The network discussion let the whole community collectively prioritize their thoughts and the exchange insights clearly showed SCSD2 what their community needed to see in its new high school. For Dr. Mercer, the results were quite surprising.

"As leader of this district I was of the opinion that we'd get a lot of support for building another high school and splitting up Boiling Springs High School into two smaller schools," he shared. "But I found out very quickly from several thousand people in the Thoughtexchange that they didn't want their community or high school split - they had other ideas."

Along with important insights like this, the simple act of giving the community a safe space to share their views and consider those of others helped SCSD2 build the trust needed to prepare for a successful bond referendum.

Actions speak louder than words

"When we put our bond together, we were confident we had done something the community would support because of the research we had done and results we got from our Thoughtexchange," Dr. Mercer notes. "We found out what the community wanted. We gave them what they wanted, and they responded in kind."

The community's response was a resounding 'yes' to a $120-million bond referendum and a momentous triumph for SCSD2.

"That Thoughtexchange gave us marching orders, and then we were able to take the results and run a very successful bond campaign in which we generated 80 percent support, which is almost unheard of in South Carolina," explains Dr. Mercer.

"Thoughtexchange is not free software; it comes with a price. But I can promise you that the results we got from Thoughtexchange were so insightful and helpful to us that we were able to take it and run with it," adds Dr. Mercer. "The return on that investment has just been incalculable, and I would not want to trade what we have received for anything. It's been priceless."