BOND REFERENDUM

New superintendent challenge: 100 days to get buy-in for a $240m bond

Two days after Daniel Gallagher signed on as superintendent of Little Elm Independent School District, the school board called a bond election.

Before taking the helm at Little Elm, Gallagher was assistant superintendent of the fast-growing district just inside the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Because of that, he knew the district needed to run a bond campaign. The reality of driving that forward so early in his superintendency was still daunting.

"I knew it was coming," Gallagher says. "But it was a bit overwhelming as a new superintendent that the bond package and passing of the bond was my responsibility."

The district hadn't passed a bond since 2002. Furthermore, it needed new facilities and upgrades to accommodate a projected 1,300 new students in the next five years. To get support, Gallagher knew he had to consult the community meaningfully to understand what mattered in their school facilities. Luckily, he had recent data from Thoughtexchange to inform his understanding.

"When school districts go out for bonds and don't involve the community or communicate well, passing them can be difficult," he shares. "I wanted to make sure we incorporated Thoughtexchange in the process."

Gathering essential facilities data to inform the bond package

Just before Gallagher's superintendency, Little Elm had partnered with Thoughtexchange to have a series of community exchanges, or online network discussions.

The first exchange let people confidentially share their thoughts in response to open-ended questions that essentially asked: "How are we doing as a district?". That exchange opened the lines of communication and jumpstarted trust between the district and its stakeholders. It also showed people strongly agreed their facilities needed upgrading. As one top thought stated:

> *Overcrowding is a concern. We really need another middle school or at least an extension to the Lakeside building. The emphasis should be on getting classroom sizes down, not just to the maximum standard set, but down to where real learning can happen. 20-25:1 is optimal.*

Feedback like this led the district to launch a follow-up exchange to home in on precisely what mattered most to the community in their school buildings. It also gave leadership a chance to ensure people understood the district perspective on facilities.

Thought Leader
Daniel Gallagher

Title
Superintendent

Little Elm
Independent School District

Industry:
K-12 Public Education

Location:
Denton County, Texas

Size:
7,785 students
9 schools

Use Case:
Bond Referendum

The results of that exchange affirmed that the community was concerned about overcrowding and would support the construction of new schools. It also showed that people supported enhancing current classrooms to meet changing learning needs. As one participant shared:

> *The one size fits all classroom structure has been a problem for many years. All children and even adults have different learning styles. I would love to see some innovative changes, and I'm sure my kids would.*

Gallagher and the Little Elm team used Thoughtexchange data along with other tools to shape their bond information campaign. They built a $240 million bond package around facilities needs the community had collectively prioritized. That included building two new middle schools.

"Thoughtexchange was one of the first things we used to gauge where our community was and make sure we had support from them before we moved forward with a long-range planning committee," Gallagher explains. "With Thoughtexchange, we were able to learn what people value most about Little Elm and its facilities, as it pertains to student growth."

Building trust and support for a successful election

When Little Elm put the proposal in front of voters, they responded with nearly 69 percent support for the bond package.

"Because we used Thoughtexchange along with some other tools, our bond passed by a significant margin," Gallagher says. "I would say to school districts out there considering taking a bond proposition to the voters, be prepared and know how to communicate. Thoughtexchange was an important tool for us to use in that process."

Gallagher was pleased with the congratulations he received for passing the bond so early in his superintendency. However, as he told the Little Elm Journal, he's more excited about what it means for students:

"This first thing I told people is that it's not about me. I feel so good about this because it's a win for the kids. The changes were long overdue. We're excited about our kids having the same opportunities that other kids have in districts around them."

CHALLENGE

- Board direction to create a bond package and run a campaign two days after signing on as a new superintendent

SOLUTION

- Thoughtexchange data enabled leadership to build a bond package based on what mattered most to stakeholders and the district

RESULTS

- 69% support for a $240 million bond on an election held just 14 weeks after becoming a new superintendent