

COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

ALTOONA SCHOOL DISTRICT

ALTOONA, WISCONSIN

Altoona's educators, families, and the community were concerned about state policies that threatened to dramatically reduce school funding. Slated to lose up to two million dollars, leaders in Altoona saw a real need for targeted action. And, they knew that an essential element for enacting change is having open lines of communication between and among stakeholders. To strengthen communications with everyone in the community on this important issue, leaders in the Altoona School District teamed up with the University of Wisconsin-Stout in a collaborative effort.

District leaders wanted community support for a referendum to reverse the reduction in funding and restore its original budget for the schools. Every year without full funding meant cuts to people and programs in the district.

The problem was that many members in the Altoona community were not aware of the funding cuts to the district or consequences for the schools. Many adults did not have school-age children. One referendum had failed due to a lack of support from the community.

The district staff and teachers were sure that they could pass the next referendum if they could provide clear information and explain the effects of the policy for teachers and for students.

Ideas for increasing community support were discussed. One of the district's AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers had heard from a colleague in another city that a professor at UW-Stout was looking for projects for her students that involved surveys and focus groups. The VISTA realized that the professor's students could do a project that combined their interests with Altoona's need for information on how to increase community support to restore school funding.

The UW-Stout professor and district leaders worked out a set of survey questions that would address the important issues, and two graduate students came to Altoona to help

conduct this project.

The students and the VISTA volunteer identified three large groups that they wanted to survey: Parents and school staff; community members without children in school; and businesses. They started by surveying parents and school staff because they could contact them via the Internet and the technology in the schools. They collected and analyzed the data. From the responses, the study group developed a detailed set of strategies and methods to improve the district's chances of passing a future referendum for restoring state funds to the schools.

A member of the school board, impressed with the quality and usefulness of the surveys, remarked, "We've been trying to get this kind of information for years." With the list of strategies generated by Altoona's educators and parents, the district will plan its next steps to convey information needed to increase community support for the next referendum. They also will continue to work with their contacts at UW-Stout on future surveys of groups in the community on funding and other policy issues.

This district took a deliberate approach to plan their next steps for passing a referendum to restore school funding. Rather than doing the same things that had previously failed, district leaders used a research-based approach to gather more and different ideas for improving communications with the community.

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