

CONNECTIONS

News from the Association of Metropolitan School Districts

December 2023

Volume 21

Number 3

Richfield Public Schools: Delivering on Our Promises

December 15, 2023
Executive/Legislative
Committee Meeting

7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Anderson Center

Bethel University

Arden Hills

January 5, 2024
Board of Directors
Meeting

7 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Quora Education Center

NE Metro 916

Little Canada

January 26, 2024
Executive/Legislative
Committee Meeting

7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Anderson Center

Bethel University

Arden Hills

February 2, 2024
Legislative Session
Preview

7:30 a.m. - 9:45 a.m.

Quora Education Center

NE Metro 916

Little Canada

DELIVERING ON OUR PROMISES

IT'S TIME TO RENEW



Question:

When is the right time to start working on a school referendum campaign?

Answer:

The day after your last campaign.

On Nov. 7, Richfield Public Schools celebrated 81 percent voter support for a tech levy renewal and 72 percent support for doubling its operating levy. It was more than the culmination of a 12-week informational campaign. "We have been working on this since 2017 when we last passed a facilities bond and operating levy," said Superintendent Steve Unowsky. "Even before that. Our school board has prioritized community engagement, collaboration with our city, and following through on our promises. Earning the trust and support of our voters is something we work on every day."

After going to voters for multiple referendums over the last two decades, in 2017, the district made a commitment to take a long-term view and return only when necessary. With a tech levy set to expire in 2024, the \$4 million renewal was necessary this year. "We spent money responsibly, stretched dollars as far as they would go, and aligned projects with our community priorities. It was about holding true to promises and communicating our progress," shared Craig Holje, Chief Administrative Officer.

It was also about mitigating the tax impact and demonstrating fiscal stewardship. Working with Ehlers Financial Advisors, the district was able to illustrate that school property taxes actually went down from 2018 through 2022, even as property values and taxes for other municipalities increased. "Ehlers was an important partner along the way, getting data to us and dissecting information. We appreciated their analysis, notifying us of key timelines, and following up to make sure all financial and legal deadlines were met," said Holje.

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Thank you to all who helped develop our 2024 legislative platform, highlighted in this issue of the newsletter. I encourage AMSD members to share the platform with your colleagues, parents, and interested community members and urge them to advocate for the platform priorities. We will need a strong collective voice advocating at the Capitol to ensure our students have the resources and opportunities they need to reach their full potential. In the meantime, I wish you a very happy holiday season!

From the AMSD Chair, Marcus Hill, West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Board Member

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Be A Voter: Appealing to People's Identities Drives Action

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Because school finance is complex, you can't just engage community members when you are asking for money. Richfield Public Schools has a long tradition of community involvement in strategic planning and advisory committee roles. "It lends credibility when our Citizens Finance Advisory and our Technology Advisory Committee are engaged in the planning," stated Holje.

Starting Early

- Fall 2022: District leaders presented the school board with projections indicating that by 2025 the district would be significantly below fund balance targets.
- Spring 2023: The district conducted the first of two surveys with Morris-Leatherman, which indicated broad community support.
- Summer 2023: After the legislative session, a second community survey by Morris-Leatherman confirmed support. Following the results of this survey, the school board members unanimously voted to put two questions on the ballot.

A Team Effort

- Community Volunteers: A coalition of community leaders formed a Citizen's Committee and worked closely with Education Minnesota on an advocacy effort. Even the Mayor was willing to speak with constituents about the referendum. These are relationships, years in the making, with citizens who care deeply about students and quality schools.
- District Staff: All staff received basic information and resources both in the spring and again at the start of the new school year. The district provided building leaders with talking points and time to practice, ask questions, and become very familiar with the information.
- Outside Support: Working in partnership with CEL Marketing PR Design and Captivate Media, the district communications team was able to successfully juggle back-to-school communications, school success stories, and the informational campaign.

Being Visible

A key goal of the campaign was ensuring multiple touchpoints with voters. People are busy and need many reminders to move from awareness to action. The informational campaign was highly visible in all school buildings, on social media, and in the local paper. Visual pieces included posters, fliers, bookmarks, videos, direct mail, and outdoor signage in the pick-up and drop-off lines.

Research indicates that parents of school-age children are most likely to support school funding needs, but least likely to make time to vote. Further, research out of Stanford University suggests nuanced messaging increases voter turnout among traditionally marginalized groups. Instead of Go Vote, the district used Be A Voter. "Appealing to people's identities drives action when the behavior in question is something most people already feel they should do," the report states.

Of course, face-to-face communication is always most effective when asking for money, and district staff led 36 presentations in the community. "We were available to talk with anyone who had a question," shared Superintendent Unowsky.

Maintaining Trust

In the thank you letter to the community, the district expressed gratitude for the long-term commitment to advancing education, equity, and excellence. The district has built trust over the course of many years. "The significant support we received is evidence of that trust," Unowsky concluded.

This month's member feature was submitted by Jennifer Valley, Director of Marketing and Communications, Richfield Public Schools.

AMSD Legislative Platform Urges State Policymakers to Build on the Momentum

At its December meeting, the Association of Metropolitan School Districts Board of Directors adopted a legislative platform calling on state policymakers to build on the momentum of the 2023 session. More specifically, AMSD is urging the Governor and Legislature to fund the new programs they adopted in the 2023 session, enhance school safety, address the impact of historic inflation and staffing shortages, and spur high school redesign by creating alternative pathways to graduation and allowing students to earn credit for learning wherever it occurs.

While the omnibus education bill approved last session made significant strides toward stabilizing the education funding system, school district budgets have been significantly impacted by historic inflation and staffing shortages. It is critical that state policymakers finish the work they started last session by funding new mandated programs and addressing the impact of inflation. An overview of the 2024 platform is outlined below.

Fund New Requirements and Inflationary Costs

Historic new expectations, programs, and requirements for school districts were included in the education bill, and numerous other bills, in the 2023 session. AMSD supported many of the new requirements, but they come with increased costs — both monetarily as well as significant staff time. Some of the new requirements were funded, while others were only temporarily funded or came without funding.

The 2024 AMSD Platform calls for a 2 percent formula increase and increasing local optional revenue to address inflationary cost pressures and the costs associated with the new requirements. In addition, it is important that the Governor and Legislature fully fund the READ Act, make compensatory hold harmless funding permanent, and establish funding streams to cover the costs of unemployment insurance and the Paid Family Medical Leave program.

Enhance School Safety

To ensure safe learning environments for students and staff, the platform urges legislators to remove the per pupil limit in the Long-Term Facilities Maintenance Revenue program and expand the allowable uses of revenue to include security modifications to buildings, remodeling, and additions to existing space. The platform also urges the Governor and Legislature to increase the Safe Schools levy, which has not been increased since 2015, from \$36 to \$108 per pupil. AMSD also urges the Legislature to clarify language related to the use of physical restraints to ensure the safety of students and staff.

Prioritize Student-Centered Learning Through Enhanced Local Control

Locally elected school boards are in the best position to work with their staff, students, parents, and communities to address local needs and challenges. Accordingly, the platform calls on legislators to repeal the requirement that school boards negotiate e-learning days and student-to-staff ratios and advocates for increasing student-centered learning opportunities by creating alternative pathways to graduation and allowing students to earn credit for learning wherever it occurs.

The graphic features the AMSD logo (Association of Metropolitan School Districts) on the left, the year '2024' in a dark blue box on the right, and the title 'LEGISLATIVE PLATFORM' in large, bold, blue letters. Below the title is the subtitle 'Build on the Momentum'. A central photograph shows a diverse group of students smiling. To the left of the photo, text reads: 'The AMSD Board of Directors acknowledges and appreciates the significant education investments approved in the 2023 legislative session. Linking the formula to inflation and reducing the shortfalls in the special education and English learner programs provides a foundation for restoring Minnesota's historic commitment to education. At the same time, historic inflation, staffing shortages, and new programs and requirements adopted in the 2023 session have created budget challenges for school districts. AMSD urges state policymakers to refrain from enacting any new mandates and address the priorities outlined in this platform in the 2024 session.' Below the photo is the heading 'ABOUT AMSD' and a paragraph: 'The Association of Metropolitan School Districts represents 47 K-12 school districts and six intermediate / cooperative districts. AMSD member school districts enroll more than one-half of all public school students in Minnesota, with the mission to lead the transformation of public education. AMSD stands ready to assist state policymakers by providing current research and data to help them make informed decisions.' At the bottom are the website 'WWW.AMSD.ORG', Facebook 'WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/AMSDMN', and Twitter '@AMSDMN'.

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Fund New Requirements, Prioritize Student-Centered Learning

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In addition, AMSD is advocating that the MN Department of Education take advantage of the flexibility offered by the U.S. Department of Education to reduce the number of required standardized tests so school districts can offer assessments that more accurately measure growth, proficiency, and college or career readiness.

Address the Educator Workforce Shortage

The staff shortages that have been predicted for more than a decade are coming to fruition. And while the state has made some progress at diversifying the educator workforce, much work remains to be done.

To address these challenges, AMSD urges continued support for programs like Grow Your Own and apprenticeships, maintaining multiple pathways to teacher licensure, and extending the short-call substitute teaching pilot project to four years, while also eliminating the required minimum salary.

- [Link: View the AMSD 2024 Legislative platform](#)

