

SALINE AREA SCHOOLS

After two unsuccessful attempts to raise money for infrastructure improvements and future-ready classrooms, this Michigan school system turned to K12 *Insight*'s community engagement tools for help. The result: better communication between the district and its community at large—and a 60-percent approval rate on the bond.

Saline
Area
Schools



THE LANDSCAPE

At the Saline Area Schools, a Michigan public school system about 40 miles west of Detroit, educators are using innovative teaching methods, challenging curriculum, and carefully chosen technology tools to give students next-generation learning experiences that will prepare them for future success.

Teaching and learning are supported by the district's vision, which focuses on innovation, the pursuit of excellence, and lifelong learning. Under the direction of Superintendent Scot Graden, district leaders knew they needed to upgrade their infrastructure and classroom resources to keep students on a 21st-century learning path.

When Graden and his team began the quest to elevate teaching and learning, they initially focused on what they wanted teachers and students to

accomplish in the classroom—and then they looked to support those activities with appropriate technologies. Saline Area Schools is a “bring your own device” (BYOD) district, but administrators also focused on providing access for students who didn't own a device.

“We focused on furniture, space, and—ultimately—technology,” Graden says. “Not devices for individual students, but technologies that might be needed for the classroom space.”



THE CHALLENGE

In 2010, the district introduced a bond measure to support its teaching and learning goals and to improve its infrastructure, which hadn't seen updates in nearly a decade.

More than half of the district's residents don't have a child in one of its schools, and so not everyone understood why the district needed the money, Graden says. This disconnect—and a challenging economic climate—are big reasons why the first bond measure failed.

The district introduced the bond measure again in 2011, only to have it voted down a second time. But this time, district leaders understood more about what went wrong.

With access to just one local news site, the district was not able to launch a full-scale media campaign to generate support for the bond among residents without a child in a Saline Area school.

What's more, district leaders realized they had to do something to earn the community's trust. This became apparent when concerns about the district's financial management began to surface.

"The community wasn't concerned with a specific project," Graden says. "But we heard loud and clear that we needed to get our financial house in order before the community would consider supporting a bond proposal."

The district put its bond campaign on hold while it worked to shore up its finances. It sold one building, closed another, and built up its rainy day fund.

With these improvements behind them, district leaders set their sights on a new bond proposal. But first, they needed a way to engage in a two-way conversation with the community to gauge expectations and needs.

The idea was for Graden and his team to tell their side of the story, while also listening to citizens' concerns—building on the trust they had established with their earlier financial improvements.



www.salineschools.org



Saline, Michigan



5,200 K-12 students

GOALS

- Build the trust and support of community members to prepare for a major bond campaign, including those who don't have children in the district's schools.
- Continue active listening to improve stakeholder relations and support better decision making.

APPROACH

Connect with stakeholders through community surveys and an always-on listening solution to understand and address key concerns.

PRODUCTS

Let's Talk!

Engage



THE SOLUTION

Saline Area Schools found the solution it was looking for in K12 *Insight*.

“This time, I felt we had a better communication system with our community,” Graden says.

The district used K12 *Insight*'s Engage climate surveys to gauge what community members thought about its infrastructure upgrades and other planned projects. And it used K12 *Insight*'s cloud-based Let's Talk! solution to improve communication—which it hoped would strengthen voters' confidence in the bond.

Let's Talk! is a 24-7 communications tool that gives stakeholders a platform to ask questions and provide feedback on critical school issues. Community members can submit questions, comments, and concerns by phone, email, social media, or on the school district's website. These messages travel through Let's Talk! and are immediately routed to the

appropriate staff member for a prompt response.

Using Let's Talk! helped district staff interact with more community members, which was especially helpful in light of the community's limited media coverage.

“This bond campaign required more of a ground game than in the past,” Graden explains. “We weren't able to get large-scale mass media distribution.” Instead, district leaders presented their vision for the bond and the projects it would support at a variety of community meetings.

“Let's Talk! played a key role, because constituents needed to trust us,” Graden says. “Putting our financial house in order was the first step. But they also needed to trust that if they said yes to the bond, we were going to use it as we said we would and be financially responsible.”



RELAUNCHING THE BOND

When the district once again prepared to present a new bond measure in 2015, it developed a theme: “Safe, Warm, Dry, and Future-Ready,” which it developed, in part, through its work with K12 *Insight*.

This theme hit on critical district needs: Students, teachers, and staff needed to know that their school buildings had safe points of entry and that things such as heating and cooling systems worked properly. But the theme also addressed the idea of next-generation classrooms, what the learning in these classrooms would look like, and what tools and approaches could support that vision.



The district’s plan was fairly broad and called for \$67.5 million over a three-bond cycle—\$40.5 million in the first year, \$13.5 million in 2019, and \$13.5 million in 2022.

Let’s Talk! played a key role in establishing the community’s trust through open and honest communication. While some community members were outspoken, not every event about the bond measure was well attended, which meant finding new ways to reach parents and community members. Graden says Let’s Talk! helped him “quietly listen” to voters’ concerns.

Owing in large part to the two-way communication that Let’s Talk! enabled, and the trust this fostered among Saline Area voters, the bond measure finally passed—with a 60-percent approval rate.

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SCOT GRADEN
SUPERINTENDENT

THE FUTURE

Since the bond measure passed, the district has continued to rely on K12 *Insight's* expertise, and it has expanded its use of Let's Talk! to more offices and employees. Having seen the power of Let's Talk! and Engage in helping to get its latest bond measure passed, Graden and his team are excited to continue the conversation with stakeholders.

"It isn't necessarily the feedback we get through Let's Talk! that is most valuable," Graden says. "It's the ability to say we're listening, and for people to understand we're listening. We're creating an environment where people feel comfortable asking questions."

While many administrators might worry that Let's Talk! opens a conduit for community members to



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RESULTS

Passage of \$67.5 million bond measure, with 60 percent of the vote.

air their grievances and fire off complaints, Graden notes that his district's experience has been much the opposite.

"When I talk to people about Let's Talk!, sometimes I feel like superintendents or administrators think it'll open a can of worms and they'll have to respond to complaints all day. That's not the case," he says.

"Listening isn't a passive exercise," says Graden. "It needs to be two-way communication. People need to feel that you'll respond to them. It's about taking this idea of listening and turning it into an actionable thing schools can do."

