



Monroe Public Schools

in Washington



thoughtexchange

Understanding funding realities:

How Monroe Public Schools used an innovative platform to address extensive facilities improvements

IN September 2014, with changes on the horizon, including a potential bond referendum seven months away, Monroe Public Schools felt the timing was right to address two of its greatest communications challenges – participation and inclusiveness.

With their previous bond debt less than a year from being paid off, the District felt it could potentially take on much needed facilities enhancements and greatly improve children's learning environments. At the same time, Monroe's district leadership knew that any enhancements had to align with the priorities of the constituents they served. They hoped part of the evolution of their communications strategy would allow them to engage their stakeholders in a two-way discussion, and ultimately inform what school improvement projects would best meet the needs and funding realities of their current environment.

In April 2015, Monroe's efforts proved successful as they passed their \$110.9 million bond – the first bond for facilities improvements approved by voters in over a decade.

1,232 participants

42,810 stars

2,438 thoughts

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Changing communications needs

For some time, Monroe had seen the effectiveness of its established engagement methods declining. In-person listening tours provided valuable input and discussion, but fewer and fewer people were attending the town-hall style meetings. The same was true for Monroe's Spanish-language engagement efforts, which included Spanish-language surveys and listening tours where children were welcome and interpreters were provided.

However, the most significant challenge with running parallel engagements was creating a coherent plan. How could they combine their Spanish and English speaking communities so that the issues and priorities raised by one group were heard and considered by the other?

“Having the entire process now completely available in Spanish, allows us to be respectful, and speak to people in the language they find most comfortable”

ROSEMARY O'NEIL, COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR AT MONROE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

New platform brings English and Spanish voices to the same table

“Thoughtexchange allowed us to take an opportunity for conversation and build relationships with a broader audience,” says Dr. Ken Hoover, Superintendent of Monroe Public Schools of his decision to partner with Thoughtexchange.

The platform's ability to reach further and deeper into the community through relevant and timely technologies was a significant consideration. Accessible at any time, from anywhere with an Internet connection, Thoughtexchange would finally allow the District to connect with community members that could not attend in-person meetings, or didn't feel comfortable expressing their opinions in public forums. “Thoughtexchange's mobile opportunities were also very important to us because many more people in our community have access to mobile devices than to computers,” adds Rosemary O'Neil, Communications Director at Monroe Public Schools.

Dr. Hoover and the District were most excited about the promise of including English and Spanish speakers in the same conversation. At the time of Monroe's first Thoughtexchange process, questions could be presented in both English and Spanish, but the instructions for the process were presented in English. Though it wasn't perfect, the advantages of uniting English and Spanish speakers in the same process far outweighed any remaining language preference concerns.

Monroe used its first Thoughtexchange process, *Learning for Life*, to start the two-way conversation with its community. 1,232 participants shared 2,438 Thoughts – in both languages – and assigned 42,810 Stars to share ideas that were important across the district. This level of participation was unprecedented for Monroe, and affirmed that the surfaced insight represented the broadest portion of the community they had ever reached.

Evolving into a better platform for inclusion

Learning for Life was the first two-language engagement of its kind, and provided valuable insight into the future of multiple-language engagements. In fact, Thoughtexchange was able to develop an entirely Spanish-language interface in time for Monroe's second engagement, *Monroe Facilities 2014*. This allowed participants with no knowledge of English to contribute their thoughts and prioritize the thoughts of others without impediment.

"Having the entire process now completely available in Spanish, allows us to be respectful, and speak to people in the language they find most comfortable," says O'Neil. "Seeing Thoughtexchange evolve its own processes assured us that we will be able to develop and maintain important relationships with our stakeholders over the long term," she adds.



Monroe Public Schools

Monroe Public Schools' motto is "learning for life," and this dedication shows in the wide range of programs offered to its 7,000 students. Continually striving to provide just the right fit, the district offers traditional K-12 classrooms, alternative programs, and programs for students that excel and those with special learning needs. monroe.wednet.edu

Record facilities engagement sends clear message

A representative bond proposal had the potential to generate \$110.9 million in tax revenue, and qualify Monroe for \$21 million in state construction assistance. The results of the *Monroe Facilities 2014* process revealed that the community wanted a package that tackled as many improvements as possible without raising taxes. This included updates to Park Place, Salem Woods, and Sky Valley schools.

The District also discovered that some constituents wanted support for academics to come first. This insight allowed Dr. Hoover and his team to address concerns directly and advocate more effectively. By reassuring community members that the District's primary focus would remain on academics, the discussion surrounding learning environments came into context. "The infographic Thoughtexchange created for our website revealed how community input created the final list of facilities projects we put forward. We found it invaluable in our communications efforts, and used it as the opening for all of our community presentations," says Dr. Hoover.

Creating a stronger community

"Schools evolve out of strong communities. To have that strength you need mutual respect and a willingness to hear what each other is saying," says Dr. Hoover. By hearing the voices of more stakeholder groups, and allowing them to learn from each other in a way that was never possible before, Monroe created that rapport.

In turn, the District limited the scope of its facilities plan to stay within the current tax rate, and in April 2015, voters passed the bond. Thanks to community input, Monroe was able to address an extensive list of maintenance and improvement projects – a success that will impact all of Monroe's students.

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DR. KEN HOOVER,
SUPERINTENDENT OF MONROE PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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