

## Wisconsin school district taps alumni and community as a powerful engagement and fundraising resource

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Having to do more with less might sound like a tired cliché, but it’s a daily reality for Wisconsin’s Howard-Suamico School District and many other K-12 districts.

“Wisconsin school districts are operating at pre-2011 funding levels, while our operating costs have increased significantly since that time,” said Superintendent Damian LaCroix, echoing a common theme in school districts nationwide. “We knew we had to think differently about our revenue streams.”

Howard-Suamico has achieved success by tapping into a powerful resource that LaCroix believes is underutilized in K-12 education: connections with alumni and the community.

“K-12 school districts in general have done a poor job of staying connected with their alumni,” he said, calling this a “missed opportunity.” It’s a different story in higher education, where colleges and universities have developed extensive alumni networks that support these institutions financially and in countless other ways.

Alumni networks hold great potential as a source of assistance for K-12 districts: According to a survey from the Moran Group, 50 million high school graduates would give back to their school if asked—resulting in billions of dollars in additional funding. K-12 leaders find creating an alumni network to be a challenging task.

### Fast Facts

- District profile** Howard-Suamico School District in Wisconsin has eight schools and over 6,000 students in grades 4K-12.
- The challenge** District officials were looking for creative ways to do more with limited funding, while increasing community engagement
- The solution** The district partnered with Alumni Nations to build and grow an extensive alumni network to increase engagement and financial support.
- The results** Howard-Suamico’s “Pirate Nation” website has almost 30,000 members and more than 3,500 active followers— and this alumni network has played a key role in the district’s \$3.5 million capital campaign.



To overcome this challenge, Howard-Suamico has partnered with Alumni Nations, a company with extensive experience in alumni outreach and community engagement.

With help from Alumni Nations, Howard-Suamico has tracked down the current contact information for nearly 13,000 alumni. The district has launched a “Pirate Nation” website, with more than 3,500 active followers—and this alumni network has been a key factor in driving the success of a \$3.5 million capital campaign.

Alumni Nations “has given us a conceptual framework for engaging with alumni more effectively, and an engine to do that,” LaCroix said. “It’s allowing us to be more strategic in our approach.”

### **Engaging with alumni**

After meeting with LaCroix and his staff, Alumni Nations put together a customized implementation guide with short- and long-term action steps, as well as engagement strategies for connecting with Bay Port High School alumni and forging strong relationships with them. Alumni Nations provided training and support for district personnel to learn the techniques required in this new reality of engaging community and alumni support.

The process began with a survey of alumni and community interests, so both Alumni Nations and Howard-Suamico administration could understand how these key stakeholders preferred to be reached, which activities they were most interested in, and which factors influenced their opinion of Bay Port High School the most.

Alumni Nations created the district’s alumni database and populated it with names, addresses, and email addresses of nearly 13,000 members. The database has now grown to over 30,000 members in under a year. Using a template and content management system provided by Alumni Nations, Howard-Suamico launched a “Pirate Nation” website, complete with district news, alumni events, information about volunteering, and a donation page.

District staff then set about publicizing this alumni network. Postcards were sent to alumni; printed business cards with sign-up information were handed out at sporting events, concerts, and other school events; and printed “Pirate Nation” yard signs line the streets of Howard and Suamico.

“We’ve done some good work with branding, such as using the hashtag #PirateNation in all of our tweets,” said Brian Nicol, communications and development coordinator for the district. “And we probably have about 300 yard signs throughout our community.”

Within the first year of Pirate Nation’s launch, more than 3,500 supporters and alumni had signed on the Pirate Nation website.



Engagement is a two-way street, and if school districts want to ask something of their alumni, they must provide value in return. Howard-Suamico is using the content management system provided with its Pirate Nation website to send out an alumni newsletter with news about the district, profiles of successful alumni, and other Pirate-related stories and events.

“People want to be part of something successful, part of a winner,” LaCroix said. “What is required of *all* of us in K-12 education is a more concerted effort to tell our story and tell it well, to share our successes with a wider community. We’re trying to do that through our Pirate Nation website and through community meetings and events.”

### **‘Friendraising’ leads to fundraising**

Both Nicol and LaCroix recommended spending time nurturing relationships with alumni before asking them for money—in other words, “friendraising” before fundraising.

“Build your alumni nation first and start your capital campaigns later, once you’ve got a large network of followers. This is a new concept for many in K-12 education, so be patient—it takes some time (for your network) to grow,” Nicol advised.

Added LaCroix: “If you enter into it with the mindset that this is about relationship-building, the fundraising aspect will take care of itself over time.”

That’s what happened in Howard-Suamico where Pirate Nation has played a key role in the district’s “Upward Together” campaign that is, raising \$3.5 million to renovate facilities, provide rich professional learning experiences for teachers, and enhance the student experience as well.

A significant portion of the money raised in its Upward Together campaign has come from alumni donations made through the Pirate Nation website—but only after district leaders have invested time in engaging their alumni, communicating about the district, and tapping into their “Pirate Pride.”

As Howard-Suamico continues to grow its alumni network, the district is exploring new ways to leverage this resource. For example, Pirate Nation soon will include an e-commerce section where alumni and supporters can buy Pirate-themed clothing and souvenirs, with the proceedings supporting district initiatives. District officials also are considering how they can recruit alumni to volunteer as tutors or mentors to students.

“What I value most about Alumni Nations is the knowledge they bring to the table,” LaCroix said. “They are very accessible and have a commitment to helping us succeed.”

Alumni Nations is “very personable, responsive to our needs, and invested in our success,” Nicol added. “I see this as a model that can pay dividends in a number of ways.”

