

Alumni Engagement Leads to Capital Improvements for Menasha Joint School District

“If we’re going to have quality schools, somebody is going to have to step up and fund us for what we need. That’s why these are conversations that are necessary to have.” – Chris VanderHeyden, Menasha Joint School District Superintendent



When the Menasha Joint School District in the Fox Valley of Wisconsin looked to make much-needed upgrades to some of its athletic facilities and band uniforms, it knew its best option would be to embark on a capital campaign within its close-knit community.

Working with Alumni Nations, the school district planned and implemented its “Menasha Strong” campaign, raising \$3.5 million to revitalize and modernize some of Menasha High School’s old and outdated facilities. The campaign leveraged resources from local leaders, prominent regional businesses, notable alumni and key members of the district community.

Chris VanderHeyden, superintendent of the Menasha Joint School District, says that funding provided through Menasha Strong campaign has improved the district’s ability to provide its students with robust academic and athletic resources.

A need to update aging infrastructure

Menasha High School’s football and soccer field, Nathan Calder Stadium, has been a center of the community for years. But at 54 years old, the stadium was showing signs of its age and needed improvements in several key areas.

“We were lacking accessibility for disabled spectators, and the concrete really needed some sealant,” VanderHeyden says.

Fast Facts

- District profile** The Menasha Joint School District has eight schools and serves more than 3,600 students in grades 4K–12.
- The challenge** The school district needed to make upgrades to some of its athletic facilities and purchase new uniforms for its high school band.
- The solution** The district partnered with Alumni Nations to conduct a feasibility study and embark on a \$3.5 million capital campaign.
- The results** The district reached its fundraising goal and work has started on its facilities. The campaign also allowed the district to engage key members of the community.



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Additionally, the school's track facility, Bayer Field, needed to be resurfaced. In fact, because of its outdated infrastructure, including the lack of a pole vault pit, the high school was unable to host track and field meets of its own.

The high school marching band, nicknamed the "Blue Jay Brigade," was also in need of new uniforms. The band, an important point of pride for the Menasha community, had current uniforms that were more than 25 years old and had seen better days.

Developing a clear solution

The Menasha Joint School District needed the community's financial support to bring these facilities and equipment into the 21st century. With a referendum out of the question, VanderHeyden says that the district looked to explore a community-based capital campaign.

The district reached out to Alumni Nations, a firm that specializes in alumni outreach and community engagement, to conduct a feasibility study assessing how much money could be raised through community donations alone.

VanderHeyden says that the district also aimed to engage its constituency in more meaningful ways, leveraging the capital campaign to help share the district's story with community members.

"We didn't want to only be talking to people the year we need money from them," VanderHeyden says.

The school district had developed a plan to address its targeted facility needs, initially believing it needed to raise about \$6.5 million from the community. Alumni Nations then stepped in to conduct the feasibility study, determining whether the community could support a campaign in that amount. The firm's team met with various community leaders, including business owners and presidents of foundations. Through these one-on-one meetings, Alumni Nations found that the campaign would likely max out at around \$3.5 million.

Armed with this information, Alumni Nations helped the district move forward with its capital campaign. This started with identifying two community leaders to head up the effort—a step that's critical to any fundraising effort.

"You need to make sure you're selecting the right people for the job," said Jim Burgraff, managing partner of Alumni Nations. "You need people who have connections and are able to take on all the responsibilities of the campaign."

The campaign took off when Alumni Nations began connecting the district's leaders and representatives with members of the local business community.



Before going public with the campaign, the firm helped the district solicit large donations from local business leaders and philanthropists. In fact, by the time the district began asking the general public for contributions, it had already raised about 70 percent of the money it needed.

VanderHeyden says he's thankful for the support that was provided by Alumni Nations throughout the course of the Menasha Strong campaign.

"It was very fascinating to go and sit down with the leaders of our community and have these conversations," VanderHeyden says. "We were able to garner a lot of support that way."

Through these efforts, the Menasha Strong campaign reached its goal of \$3.5 million raised in just 18 months.

Recapturing the narrative

Renovations at Nathan Calder Stadium are already underway, and plans are in place to replace the old band uniforms and make the necessary updates to Bayer Field.

VanderHeyden says that the community has been rallying around the district's capital improvements in numerous ways.

"People are really proud of the fact that this is another good thing going on in town," he says. "I think people are seeing some positive momentum in Menasha, and this is more progress in that direction."

Thanks in part to the success of the Menasha Strong campaign, VanderHeyden says that the district has also been able to recapture some of the community narrative regarding its schools and their performance.

"We have to be intentional about putting a positive message out there," he says. "We are making sure people know about all the positive things happening with our schools and our students."



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