

DES MOINES PUBLIC SCHOOLS | 2016 Golden Achievement Award

First in the Nation: Education and the Iowa Caucuses

Every four years, the state of Iowa is thrust into the national political spotlight as Presidential hopefuls and their campaigns set up shop in hopes of winning the first-in-the-nation caucuses.

Located in Iowa's capital city, Des Moines Public Schools was at ground zero for much of the 2016 campaign activity as well as the national and international media coverage that follows the caucuses. While the caucuses are a winnowing process for candidates, they are also a learning opportunity for students across all grade levels.

Des Moines Public Schools took advantage of the unique opportunity presented by the caucuses, from developing a curriculum used by other schools across the state to using mock caucuses as teaching tools at several schools and from hosting visits by presidential candidates to allowing 45 of our school buildings to be used as caucus sites.

RESEARCH

In 2013, the Des Moines School Board adopted a set of Student Expectations. Included is the expectation that "students have world awareness," which includes an understanding of "the rights and obligations of citizenship at local, state, national and global levels" and to be "actively engaged in community life."

Based upon this objective for students, Iowa's presidential caucuses provided a unique, once-every-four-years opportunity for experiential learning tied directly to citizenship and community engagement. Accordingly, the school district's curriculum staff, principals and communication office research led to the following three priorities:

- Use the district's expertise to become a lead agent in developing educational materials about the caucuses for use by all school districts;
- Identify in-school opportunities for hands-on learning activities for students in all grade levels;
- Promote and communicate the district's involvement with and use of Iowa's caucus system as a learning and engagement opportunity for students.

ANALYSIS/PLANNING

Just as there is an ebb and flow to campaigns, hoping to peak at the time of the vote, the approach taken with the educational aspect of the caucuses took a similar approach by building up to the date of the Iowa caucuses.

While the very first caucus-related student activity took place in December 2014, when a countywide mock caucus was held just as the presidential candidates were beginning to lay the groundwork to their own campaigns, much of the activity took place during the 2015-16 school year.

Based on the trend of campaigns, and corresponding media coverage, the district's caucus-related efforts took place generally in two phases:

- Phase 1 (September-December 2015): Lay the groundwork with classroom lessons about the caucuses as well as third party organizations presenting about the caucus process.
- Phase 2 (January-February 2016): Focus on what was learned about the process, including mock caucuses at schools as well as actual caucus participation by students of age.

COMMUNICATIONS/IMPLEMENTATION

Des Moines Public Schools reported its caucus-related activities on a variety of channels, including through state and national news media, the districts web site and social media pages, and its cable television station. Highlights of major steps implement and reported include:

- Three DMPS teachers developed a new curriculum about the caucuses, which has been used by schools across the state.
- More than half of DMPS's 60 schools held mock caucuses, giving thousands of students a hands-on lesson in the process.
- Nearly 4,000 DMPS students at eight schools participated in the Iowa Youth Straw Poll.
- Hillis Elementary School held their famous Cookie Caucus (first reported on NBC's Today Show), a delicious way for students to learn about the process without focusing on individual candidates.
- Organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens visited high schools to also provide caucus trainings (25% of DMPS students are Latino, and students who will be 18 by November 2016 could participate in the actual caucuses).
- Bernie Sanders visited and spoke to student assemblies at two high schools – Hoover and Roosevelt – in January.
- Hillary Clinton met with students at Moulton Elementary School in September before speaking to supporters in the gym; she also held the final rally of her Iowa campaign at Lincoln High School.
- The district welcomed hundreds of journalists from around the world covering candidate visits as well as how students engage with the caucus process.
- 45 of the district's 60 school buildings hosted caucuses on the night of February 1.

EVALUATION

The school district's caucus related activity, and corresponding communications efforts, saw success by several measures:

- 4,000 students from the school district participated in a statewide straw poll, and more than half of the district's schools held mock caucuses or straw polls of their own.
- While exact figures are not available, hundreds of high schools students participated in the actual caucuses (if they were to turn 18 by November 2016) and/or volunteered their time for a variety of campaigns.
- The media's strong interest in the Iowa caucus led to a large numbers of stories connected to the school district centered around the educational activities, candidate visits, and schools as caucus sites. During the week leading up to the February 1 caucuses there were more than 120,000 media references to Des Moines Public Schools or one of our schools.
- Caucus-related content was regularly shared on the school district's online tools, including our web site (which average just over 1,000,000 visits per month) and social media pages (the district's Facebook and Twitter pages have 36,000 and 13,000 followers, respectively).

Looking ahead to 2020, if Iowa retains its first-in-the-nation caucuses, a way to improve this year's initiatives and garner more attention may include developing a central online presence for all district caucus activities, a tool helpful to students, teachers, the media and all interested parties.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

The following includes additional information and/or links related to several of the caucus-related initiatives at Des Moines Public Schools references in the two-page summary.

CAUCUS CURRICULUM

In October 2015 “Caucus 101” was launched. The curriculum, developed under the auspices of the Iowa Secretary of State’s office, was designed to provide teachers at all grade levels across the state with options for educating and engaging students about the caucus process.

The launch of Caucus 101 received extensive statewide media coverage at a time when the presidential campaigns were becoming even more active in Iowa.

Three teachers from Des Moines Public Schools developed the Caucus 101 curriculum:

- Canada Snyder – Central Academy
- Joseph Nydle – Hoover High School
- Adam Arthur – Lincoln High School

The Caucus 101 curriculum is available at <http://teachers.caucus101.com/>

IOWA YOUTH STRAW POLL

A component of the Caucus 101 curriculum was the Iowa Youth Straw Poll. Held on January 26, 2016, just days before the actual presidential caucus, the straw poll was a chance for students to practice some of what they learned about the caucus process. In addition, the straw poll earned media coverage not only as a teaching tool but also as a bellwether for the actual caucuses (based on the assumption that the preferences of students would reflect those of their parents).

Des Moines Public Schools was the largest participant in the Iowa Youth Straw Poll, with nearly 4,000 students from 8 schools taking part.

Additional information about the Iowa Youth Straw Poll is available at https://sos.iowa.gov/news/2016_01_26.html.

DISTRICT COVERAGE

In many ways, the school district's communications office operates as a newsroom, providing coverage of a range of events and developments at Des Moines Public Schools. Through the district's news blog, photography, video, social media, and e-newsletter, multiple reports were shared about initiatives related to the Iowa caucuses.

News Blog

The school district's news blog, "For the Record," is hosted on the school district's web site, which averages just over one million unique visits per month. The following are stories posted related to the Iowa caucuses:

- School House to the White House: DMPS and the Caucuses (February 1, 2016): <http://www.dmschools.org/2016/02/school-house-to-the-white-house-dmps-and-the-caucuses/>
- Cookies Counted, Not Crumbled, at Hillis Cookie Caucus (February 1, 2016): <http://www.dmschools.org/2016/02/the-cookies-dont-crumble-at-the-hillis-cookie-caucus/>
- Brody Students Cast Ballots in Iowa Youth Straw Poll (January 26, 2016): <http://www.dmschools.org/2016/01/brody-students-cast-ballots-in-iowa-youth-straw-poll/>
- Student Voters Go to the Polls at River Woods (January 22, 2016): <http://www.dmschools.org/2016/01/studentvoters-go-to-the-polls-at-river-woods/>
- Mock Caucus Rocks at McCombs Middle School (January 20, 2016): <http://www.dmschools.org/2016/01/mock-caucus-rocks-at-mccombs-middle-school/>
- Road to White House Passes Through Hoover High (January 11, 2016): <http://www.dmschools.org/2016/01/road-to-white-house-passes-through-hoover-high/>
- Student Ambassadors Welcome Former Top Ambassador to Moulton (September 22, 2015): <http://www.dmschools.org/2015/09/student-ambassadors-welcome-former-chief-ambassador-to-moulton/>
- Donkeys, Elephants and Huskies Join at Mock Caucus (December 10, 2014): <http://www.dmschools.org/2014/12/donkeys-elephants-and-huskies-join-at-mock-caucus/>

Photographs

Des Moines Public Schools places a premium on taking high-quality photos of events throughout the district. The school district's photo album is hosted on Flickr, and is home to more than 24,000 images viewed more than 12 million times. The following are photo albums related to caucus activity at Des Moines Public Schools:

- Cookies Crumble in Caucus at Hillis:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157664141060736>
- Bernie Sanders Speaks at Roosevelt High School:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157661719489924>
- Bernie Sanders Visits Hoover High:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157662853457020>
- Straw Poll at Brody Middle School:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157663396126080>
- Straw Poll at River Woods Elementary School:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157663693604621>
- McCombs Middle School Mock Caucus:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157663775381255>
- Bernie Sanders Youth Summit:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157656862700753>
- Hillary Clinton at Moulton Elementary School:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157658563953518>
- Countywide High School Mock Caucuses at Hoover:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmps/albums/72157649689404261>

Video

The school district operates a 24/7 cable television station, hosted by Mediacom Cable, and also posts the videos to its YouTube channel. The following are caucus-related video stories:

- Cookie Caucus 101: <https://youtu.be/N-L5P9zSTP4>
- Mock Caucus Rocks at McCombs Middle School: <https://youtu.be/Nvu1Oo4u268>
- Student Delegates Convene for Mock Caucus at Hoover: <https://youtu.be/s-vRorRWnUg>

Social Media

Des Moines Public Schools maintains an active and vibrant presence on social media, using Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr and YouTube. News and information is integrated and shared across those multiple sites in order to be accessible to the widest audience.

The district's largest social media presence is on Facebook (www.facebook.com/dmschools) with more than 36,000 followers and Twitter (www.twitter.com/dmschools) with over 13,000 followers.

All of the blog posts, photo albums and videos referenced above – along with news media reports about the school district and the caucuses – were shared across these social media sites.

E-Newsletter

The school district's weekly e-newsletter – TheWeek@DMPS – is distributed each Friday morning to more than 27,000 parents, staff, community leaders, media and others. The caucus-related stories referenced above were included in the following editions of the e-newsletter:

- February 5, 2016: <http://conta.cc/1Tb85hh>
- January 29, 2016: <http://conta.cc/1Tb89gP>
- January 15, 2016: <http://conta.cc/1QpuIy5>
- October 9, 2015: <http://conta.cc/1P3dar2>
- September 25, 2015: <http://conta.cc/1M7PIqX>

NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE

In many ways, the Iowa caucuses are a made-for-media event as the first testing ground for White House hopefuls. The media coverage of the caucuses is not just of the candidates and campaign, but also of a variety of supporting elements to the caucus process in Iowa.

For Des Moines Public Schools, our efforts to teach students about, and help them engage with, the political process was such a story.

In addition, the media looked for personalities who were making a difference in Iowa's political landscape. One such example is a profile by Fusion, the Latino-focused television network with Jorge Ramos, of Des Moines school board member Dionna Langford, who was featured as part of a series on 30 leaders under 30. Her story can be seen at <http://fusion.net/video/262493/dionna-langford-the-30/>.

Schools in Des Moines welcomed a range of national and international news organizations covering aspects of the caucuses, whether an educational effort or a candidate visit. Examples of news organizations present at Des Moines Public Schools in the weeks leading up to the caucuses include:

- CNN
- New York Times
- Washington Post
- Tokyo Broadcasting Service
- CBS This Morning
- NHK
- ABC News
- Los Angeles Times
- Times of London
- National Public Radio
- NBC News
- Politico
- Reuters
- Bloomberg
- C-SPAN
- MSNBC

Finally, during the week leading up to the February 1 caucuses alone, based upon our iQmedia monitoring service, there were more than 120,000 news media references to either Des Moines Public Schools or one of our schools. While much of this coverage stemmed from the fact that 45 of the district's 60 school buildings served as caucus sites, the coverage also included candidate visits to schools, educational initiatives around the caucus process, and the potential impact of young, new voters.