



Greenville ISD

District has the community seeing red — and it's not what you'd expect

by Autumn Rhea Carpenter



Superintendent
Donald Jefferies

In today's world, perception is everything. For school systems that receive an academically unacceptable rating from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), public confidence sinks fast. When Greenville ISD received this rating in one subject area and weathered a lackluster football season, teachers, faculty and students were despondent and community spirit was at an all-time low. But thanks to a media-savvy district employee, this negative outlook was reversed, and all it took was a red T-shirt.

Educating the community about how the TEA rating system works and that the district showed successful performances within the majority of the standardized rating system had proven challenging using traditional communications tactics.



Kelli Tharp

"I used the standard tactics, such as press releases and articles, to try to overcome the negative press resulting from the unacceptable rating," recalls Kelli Tharp, director of community services. "Nothing worked. We were stuck with that label for the next two years."

Then, in the fall of 2011, Tharp, who worked in corporate communications prior to public education, awoke from a dream with the words "Spread the Red" in her mind. These words would become the slogan that would transform the morale of her district and community.

"I decided to stop working on the defense and start using a more positive strategy," she says.

"'Spread the Red' is a campaign for our children," Tharp continues. "It's a campaign to upraise their spirits, rejoice in their victories and blaze their successes. It is a campaign to harmonize our collective voice and show pride in our schools, our educators and our community. It is a venue to sing the story of Greenville ISD."

Even with a world champion high school robotics team, 2012 Solar Car Challenge participants and impressive UIL academic competition track records, the district's reputation had suffered. "Spread the Red" provided a vehicle to promote the district's successes and regain community support.

Tharp envisioned a marketing campaign with the "Spread the Red" slogan printed in white letters across the front of red T-shirts along with the dis-

trict's mascot and website, www.spreadthered.org. She pitched the simple concept to Superintendent Donald Jefferies, who quickly approved the idea, and an initial 1,000 shirts were ordered.

"When we launched the 'Spread the Red' campaign, I asked each building principal to buy the shirts for their staff," Tharp says. "They did so eagerly and we garnered immediate internal support."

Each of the campuses then sold shirts on open house nights.

"We sold the shirts almost at cost. I didn't want this to be a fundraiser, but a pure brand reimagining initiative," says Tharp, adding that this year order forms were sent home with every student and the new shirt design was advertised through normal media outlets.

Greenville ISD students, staff and the community soon were wearing the shirts proudly, and two subsequent orders were placed to keep up with the campaign's popularity.

"Dozens of families bought shirts for the entire family, and people still walk into our office off the street to buy shirts," Tharp says. "Next year I plan to sell the shirts at athletic and fine arts events as well."

Two local banks, a dentist and a few restaurants showed their community support by purchasing the shirts for their employees. The shirts have become a popular fashion statement on spirit days at the district's five elementary schools, sixth grade center, middle school and high school. The shirts were even a wardrobe staple for Greenville students and faculty who traveled to Europe.

"I've seen a 75-year-old woman and a teenager both wearing the T-shirt," says Tharp. "It's surprising how race, socio-economics and politics are forgotten when you see someone wearing our shirt. This campaign has helped people see past their differences and come together as a community."

The "Spread the Red" slogan also provided Greenville ISD with a more cohesive framework for branding and marketing among all schools.

"Before we launched this branding plan, every school had its own marketing materials, and communications were very disjointed," admits Tharp.



Lisa Hill (right) of Hunt Regional Medical Center stands with Laura Carter, Greenville ISD director of transportation. Hunt Regional Medical Center supported the district's "Spread the Red" advertising program when it purchased four bus advertisements, a series of email blast advertisements, ad space in a district-published brochure and several website sponsorships.

From marketing to making money

Leveraging the momentum from the T-shirt campaign, Tharp expanded the effort to include a paid advertising program whose proceeds help to offset state funding shortages. The goals are to help Greenville ISD maintain healthy financial stability, alleviate program reductions, and to continue to place dollars directly into classrooms, programs and facilities.

The school district created an advertising rate card with consistent pricing that offers advertising opportunities in or on:

- school buses,
- iPad covers,
- school-generated brochures,
- school calendars,
- e-blasts to Greenville ISD employees and
- the district's website.

The program also offers local businesses sponsorship opportunities and short-term naming rights of the football and baseball fields and basketball gymnasium.

"School systems have to start getting creative in their marketing efforts," says Tharp. "Our advertising initiative not only helped Greenville ISD, it offered visual positioning and branding opportunities to local businesses."

Since launching the advertising initiative in May, Greenville ISD has banked almost \$70,000.

"A local car dealership paid \$25,000 to name the Greenville football stadium for three years," says

Superintendent Donald Jefferies. "That shows that even though our football program is struggling, the community support is strong."

Greenville ISD also joined forces with School Spirit Pays, powered by First Data Corp., the world's largest credit processor. Businesses that accept credit and debit cards can use School Spirit Pays to process credit and debit transactions. Every month, 25 percent of those sales are donated in the business' name to support schools in the community.

Greenville ISD also is building positive business relationships in the community. For instance, a local Mexican restaurant offers discounts to customers who wear "Spread the Red" shirts in the restaurant. As the district's 2012-2013 "Spread the Red" sponsor, the restaurant also sells the shirts in its foyer.

This type of partnership is not isolated, and the district has several other businesses that can tell similar stories of how they now help make the advertising campaign a success.

"Districts larger than Greenville with active marketing components have not raised almost \$70,000 in a school year," says Jefferies. "That kind of funding is a teacher's salary; this campaign has so much potential."

This past June, Greenville ISD received a national award for its comprehensive advertising campaign. The district was one of only seven Texas districts to receive a Golden Achievement Award from the National School Public Relations Association.

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Third, fourth and fifth graders and faculty at Lamar Elementary in Greenville ISD proudly wear their "Spread the Red" shirts on designated spirit days.

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Offering local companies a specific demographic is another perk to the advertising initiative. This program allows local businesses to tailor their messages to the district's 600 employees for an inexpensive rate.

"The businesses are loving the chance to reach an educated, targeted audience," says Jefferies, adding that the campaign also encourages the community to shop locally.

With the initiative in motion, Tharp is working to enhance the Greenville ISD website.

"Our main goal is to show our students and staff doing their very best," says Tharp. "We are improv-

ing our website and using social media to promote all the good that Greenville ISD has to offer."

Adds Jefferies: "We live in a time when it's our obligation to promote our successes and do a better job of sharing what our educators and students are accomplishing in public schools. Our campaign is the vehicle for this kind of positive publicity and a great communications model that other school districts could easily implement. It all starts with a catchy slogan."

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