

Escambia County, FL's Children's Services Council

A November 2020 Ballot Measure Case Study



Summary

In 2019, a community roundtable of 50 Escambia County leaders came together to address issues facing their children and youth. At the time, the county ranked 47th out of 67 counties in the 2019 Florida Child Well-Being Index, a comprehensive measure of economic, health, and education outcomes among children.¹ To address these issues, the community roundtable launched a campaign to create a voter-established Children's Services Council (CSC)—an independent governing body with the power to levy taxes and direct the revenue exclusively to services for kids. In November 2020, Escambia County citizens voted to establish a CSC that is projected to raise over \$10 million annually for children and youth in the county.

How Did Escambia County Create a CSC?

Achieve Escambia, a local nonprofit dedicated to improving childhood outcomes in the county, organized the community roundtable, which included representatives from the county's early learning programs, school districts, higher education, and businesses. All the members were motivated to improve children and youth outcomes in Escambia, where kids faced massive challenges. For example, rates of child abuse were nearly double state averages while rates of children in poverty were substantially higher than in neighboring counties.² The roundtable met from June to August of 2019 before deciding that a CSC was the best option to address these consistent youth issues.

In November 2019, the community roundtable commissioned a baseline poll to determine current levels of support for the CSC prior to the start of the campaign. The poll showed that 58% of respondents would support a new property tax averaging \$40 to fund a CSC. While this level of community approval was encouraging, it was lower than what advocates desired. To

Ballot Measure/ Tax Details

Proposed Tax
0.5 mill property
tax increase

Annual Revenue
Original estimate:
\$7.8 million
Revised estimate:
\$10 million

Length of Tax
10 years

Final Vote Results
61% approval

Escambia County Details

Population
318,316

**Population Younger
Than 18 Years**
20.8% (U.S. average: 22%)

**Median Household
Income**
\$49,286
(U.S. average: \$68,703)

increase support, the roundtable launched the Vote Yes for Kids campaign in February 2020 with the goal of securing and passing a CSC ballot measure in the November 2020 election. Local political campaigner Ron Ellington was hired to run the campaign.

How Did the Campaign Maximize Existing Structures?

The Vote Yes for Kids campaign understood the challenges of passing a tax increase in a conservative-leaning county like Escambia, which generally elects candidates that oppose tax increases. The campaign had to convince voters that a CSC—and the tax required to support it—was a prudent investment for the community to make. Early on, advocates compared childhood outcomes in Escambia County to those in counties of similar size to demonstrate the need. The campaign’s messaging emphasized that the county wasn’t only failing to improve child outcomes; it was slipping backward.

Having an existing state model for Florida’s CSCs was an extremely helpful asset. The county did not have to debate the different types of taxes, governance structures, or accountability mechanisms to fund the CSC since the state statute already outlined acceptable funding approaches. To learn more about the model, Ellington and other campaign leaders visited and held virtual learning sessions with existing CSCs around the state. Throughout the campaign, they used the nine existing and successful CSCs—the oldest of which was established in 1946—as examples with decades of positive results for kids in their communities.

Similarly, the campaign built upon the networks Achieve Escambia established through its years of work with service agencies, law enforcement, providers, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, military, and businesses. The campaign leveraged the network for early donations, support, and the influence of its members, which included current mayors of towns within Escambia County. The Vote Yes for Kids campaign produced radio ads with these mayors voicing their support for the initiative, something they were happy to do given their existing relationships with Achieve Escambia.

How Did the Campaign Build Voter Support?

The Vote Yes for Kids campaign had a two-phase approach to generate support for the CSC ballot measure: (1) convince the county commissioners to place the CSC measure on the 2020 ballot and (2) encourage voters to vote for it. Since three of the five commissioners faced reelection, the Vote Yes for Kids campaign had to convince them that the CSC ballot measure would be both popular and unlikely to provoke large opposition. Advocates asked regular citizens in all five of the county’s districts to write letters of support to the commissioners; nearly 200 were written in total. Then they engaged high-profile community leaders to voice their support for the measure. In total, more than 50 leaders supported the campaign, including members of the Pensacola City Council and all five members of the Escambia County School Board. In June 2020, one Escambia County commissioner came out against the measure but did not lead an effort against it. The following month, the remaining four commissioners voted to place the CSC measure on the ballot.

Once the campaign secured placement of the measure on the ballot, advocates had to ensure voters approved the measure. Vote Yes for Kids commissioned two more public opinion polls in August and September of 2020, showing an average of 57% voter support—a moderate, yet steady, amount. Consequently, the Escambia County team decided to not begin the public education portion of their campaign until two months before election day. Although campaigns usually hope to boost voter support with public education efforts, the Vote Yes for Kids campaign knew that launching a highly public effort might trigger organized opposition that could degrade existing support, a circumstance which occurred just three hours away in Leon County for a similar ballot measure. Therefore, advocates mounted an intentionally low-profile approach. Prior to September, the campaign did not publish poll data, place any op-eds in local newspapers, or commission any TV commercials. Only after Labor Day did advocates begin to send campaign mailers and leverage social media. The strategy worked, and the CSC faced no formal opposition throughout the entire campaign.



Vote Yes for Kids used digital advertisements like this one to rally supporters.

The campaign did receive some pushback online, primarily in the comment threads of news articles and in fringe Facebook groups. While many of the comments were in good faith, some were personal attacks on the campaign and its organizers. As one of the leaders of the campaign, Ellington stressed the importance of not engaging with this type of opposition. According to Ellington, “95% of our 50-person campaign team had never been on another political campaign before. Dealing with these comments was a learning experience for them. But in August, we had a poll that said that 61% of the county supports the measure. We don’t have to convince the naysayers, just get our supporters to the polls!”

Campaign organizers take solace in knowing that online groups like those do not represent all the residents of Escambia County. “After the election, we saw countless comments in these groups that said, ‘I don’t know anyone who voted for the CSC,’” said Kimberly Krupa, executive director of Achieve Escambia. “It shows how small of a bubble these people were living in and that the broader community understands the need to support our kids and families.”

How Did the Campaign Overcome Natural Disasters?

Like all other 2020 campaigns, Vote Yes for Kids had to adapt to campaigning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant reimagining normal campaign activities like door knocking, one-on-one sit downs, and soliciting in-person donations from individuals. Escambia County has a large service industry built on a resort economy. When COVID-19 hit and many service workers lost their jobs, campaign leaders decided they did not want to rely on smaller, individual donations from a workforce already in need. Instead, they targeted contributions from larger businesses in the county, those that had the income and stability to donate thousands of dollars.

In addition to COVID-19, the Vote Yes for Kids campaign also endured two hurricanes in the months preceding the November election. In September, Hurricane Sally hit Escambia County, causing more than \$300 million in damage to the community, which affected the campaign's operations.³

Parts of the county did not have electrical power and internet access for many days, and in some places weeks, which delayed the installation of campaign billboards and the printing of promotional mailers. The campaign estimates it lost nearly a week to the hurricane. Then, in late October, Hurricane Zeta hit the same coast. Although Zeta had less impact than Sally, the hurricane knocked down power lines and, in the words of Ellington, "retraumatized" the county.

The hurricanes reinforced the campaign's decision to raise money from larger firms and businesses. Advocates argued that disasters such as the hurricanes and pandemic illustrated the needs facing Escambia's children, providing another compelling reason to support kids' services with a stable source of funding. Escambia County businesses responded with a major round of funding for the campaign in the weeks following Hurricane Sally. The campaign also organized matching-donation challenges and leveraged a \$55,000 donation from Julian MacQueen, a local businessman and hotel owner, to incentivize other companies to donate. "When others saw that someone had already donated that much, it made it hard for them to say 'no,'" said Ellington.

What Happened During the CSC's First Year?

After months of strategizing, polling, fundraising, natural disasters, and public education, the Vote Yes for Kids campaign team assembled on election night for a watch party to learn if Escambia County was ready to take the next step toward improving outcomes for children and families by establishing a CSC. They did not have long to wait. By 7:30 p.m. that evening, the results were in: 61% of voters cast their ballots in favor of the CSC. After a year filled with trauma, the team members celebrated the significant community win and acknowledged that their most meaningful work was about to begin.

In January 2021, the CSC board convened for the first time with its five mandated members and took preliminary steps toward setting up the board's structure, implementing the tax, and ensuring compliance with local laws. The following month, the Escambia County Commission nominated members to fill the remaining five spots in the CSC. Gov. Ron DeSantis confirmed the nominations shortly thereafter.⁴

Originally, the campaign estimated that the new tax would bring in around \$7.8 million annually for the new CSC. However, they now anticipate annual revenue of over \$10 million due to rising property tax values in the years since the original calculation.

How Will the CSC Help Escambia County's Kids?

The new Escambia CSC has the potential to serve 10,000 children ages birth to 5 years with early learning and development services. It also will provide youth out-of-school time and career readiness programs to teens and young adults. The rest of the budget will support family and community services, such as preventing child neglect, drug abuse, and juvenile justice programs.



CSCs Across Florida

Florida is one of the few states that makes it possible for localities to create and operate CSCs. Florida Statute 125.901 governs their creation and contains guidance on how to administer them. These councils do not provide services directly; rather, they fund local community organizations that provide programs and services. Over time, a local CSC often becomes a hub for data collection, assessing need, improving program quality, and other essential children's services operations.

Escambia County provides an example for Florida and the rest of the country that supporting children is a bipartisan, local issue. In November 2020, 57% of county voters chose Donald Trump for president and 61% voted in favor of the CSC. Escambia residents understood that this was a measure about their kids, not about Republican or Democratic politics.

Other communities around the country should not let a similarly tax-averse votership discourage them from pursuing a dedicated children's fund like a CSC. Ultimately, the Escambia County campaign succeeded by centering its effort on how the CSC would benefit local children and youth.



Lessons Learned

Build on existing resources and relationships.

Even though only some states have an established infrastructure to create systems like CSCs, all communities have existing organizations dedicated to supporting children and youth. Coordinate with these groups before beginning a campaign to bring all of your community's resources for kids to the same table.

Consider running a “quiet” campaign.

If strong support already exists for a dedicated children's fund in your community and additional advocacy could spark opposition, consider running a quiet campaign. That means no op-eds, advertisements, or mailers in the months leading up to the election. Use this time to continue to fundraise and to develop campaign materials for when you begin encouraging voters to support your measure.

Unforeseen challenges can create opportunity.

Find ways to use external obstacles, like natural disasters or a global pandemic, to reinforce your messaging about the importance and need for fully funded children's services.

In Dedication



Ron Ellington

1944 - 2021

Ron was a dedicated champion of kids and a vital part of the Vote Yes for Kids campaign. He leaves behind a legacy that will resonate in Escambia County and beyond for generations.

Endnotes

- 1 Florida Kids Count, *2019 Florida Child Well-Being Index* (Tampa, FL: Author, 2019) <http://floridakidscount.org/docs/2019Index/2019-cwbi.pdf>.
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, *Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates* https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/saie/#/?map_geoSelector=u18_c&s_state=12&s_county=12033&s_year=2019&s_measures=u18_snc; Department of Children and Families, *Florida Safe Families Network Data Mart* <https://flhealthcharts.com/ChartsReports/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=NonVitalIndNoGrp.DataViewer&cid=560>.
- 3 Jim Little, "Hurricane Sally Damage Estimates Surge to \$309 million in Escambia County," *Pensacola News Journal*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.pnj.com/story/news/2020/09/29/hurricane-sally-damage-escambia-county-309-million-estimates/3575062001/>.
- 4 "Escambia Children's Trust Board Members Chosen by DeSantis to Complete Board," *Pensacola News Journal*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.pnj.com/story/news/2021/03/19/escambia-childrens-trust-board-members-chosen-desantis/4769841001/>.

ABOUT CHILDREN'S FUNDING PROJECT

Children's Funding Project is a nonprofit social impact organization that helps communities and states expand equitable opportunities for children and youth through strategic public financing.

childrensfundingproject.org