

Superintendent's Advisory Group Provides Leadership for Lebanon Capital Projects Referendum

Dr. Robert Taylor, Superintendent

Long before it was proposed that a referendum was needed, the superintendent organized a Superintendent's Cabinet in order to secure suggestions from the community. The group met monthly to discuss school issues focusing on student needs in the 21st century. When the Cabinet was originally formed, the superintendent asked each school board member to submit two names of leaders from a cross-section of the community for membership. The superintendent added three others. This group met monthly and discussed a wide variety of topics. The members provided valuable feedback and offered a source of rumor control. When it was determined that renovations were needed to meet the educational needs of the 21st century, many on the cabinet became passionate about the project and became core members of the Support Lebanon Students Political Action Committee (PAC).

Some of the suggested Best Practices relating to Lebanon's \$40 million construction referendum are as follows:

1. All school board members supported the project and voted 5-0 in favor of proceeding with the referendum. Several board members, especially the board president, provided valuable assistance to the efforts. One former board member, who is also a successful farmer, assisted the campaign.
2. Any committee established, such as the Superintendent's Cabinet, should have representation from all segments of the community. The membership of this committee will become your local "experts."
3. An architectural firm was compensated to engage the community in options relating to the construction activities being considered. Three community meetings were held and participants used "clickers" during the presentations to indicate their support or lack of support for options being considered. One individual from the architectural firm had referendum experience and provided guidance to the superintendent and PAC. It is very important to use someone skilled in community engagement and campaign strategies.
4. Once options were being considered, the architectural firm provided renderings of the various construction options.
5. Two polls, conducted by professional pollsters, were taken in the community. One was conducted during the early stages to determine the level of community support and another late in the campaign (this was funded and organized by the PAC) to determine if the community was properly informed of the proposed project and what kind of information needed to be provided. Three hundred likely voters were included in the second poll. Polling data helped

determine the message and target likely voters for phone calls and canvassing. This polling data was very valuable in the late stages of the campaign.

6. Prior to proposing a referendum in the community and certainly after a referendum has been approved, the superintendent should be engaged extensively with the community. The superintendent should be involved in community organizations, either as a member or as a frequent presenter. By networking, the superintendent can identify potential endorsements, build relationships, develop community support, and market the schools. The superintendent should also spend time speaking one-to-one with constituents.

7. Lebanon's tax rate for the proposed construction project was neutral and had been declining for several years. However, the DLGF would not write the public question to reflect this. The campaign had to work very hard to inform voters that the question on the ballot left out critical information about the tax rate impact.

8. To be successful, the board and superintendent must have demonstrated that they have been prudent with the school corporation's resources in the past. The public's perception of how tax dollars have been handled in the past will be critical. It is also helpful if the community has a positive perception of the school board and superintendent.

9. A well informed and involved public is critical. A biannual district newsletter helped inform all community members (not just families with students) about referendum facts and issues as well as other school news.

10. The issues prompting the referendum should be child-centered and there should be a compelling message regarding needs.

11. Prior to the 1028 hearing, the superintendent was the "point person" crafting the message and taking it to the community. Because Lebanon's referendum was for a capital project, the schools were limited in what they could do after the 1028, and the PAC had to take the lead in communications during the campaign. The superintendent was still involved, but not as visibly.

12. The school corporation offered a back-to-school picnic for the staff to solicit staff support. Staff also organized a walk in the central municipal park after school one day to show their support for the referendum.

13. The PAC encouraged submission of letters to the editor to the local paper supporting the referendum, particularly to correct misinformation presented in negative letters. The PAC also purchased advertising in the paper, including endorsements from a mixture of high-profile community leaders (for example business owners, elected officials, and farmers).

14. The PAC secured a voter database for campaign purposes. The PAC steering committee consisted of about seven members and had a more informal group of about 50, and an e-mail list of about 130. The key to success, as with any campaign, was the grassroots efforts. The county clerk can be very helpful in providing voter and voting data.

15. Nursing home residents voted in larger numbers than expected and while the PAC reached out to a local Senior Services organization, they did not campaign in nursing homes. In hindsight this would have been time well spent.

16. The PAC used a web site, Facebook page, e-mail “push” messages, and a local electronic chat board to publicize, communicate, and correct misinformation about the referendum.

17. The PAC targeted 18- to 22-year-old LHS graduates to get them registered and interested in supporting the project (Facebook was helpful with this).

18. PAC members did targeted door-to-door canvassing and phone banking late in the campaign. Direct mail was cost prohibitive for the PAC and was not used.

19. Two PAC members and several students were at each polling site on Election Day, engaging voters as they entered the polls and answering last-minute questions. The superintendent took a personal day and was also visible at the polls.

Summary

Planning for a referendum should begin months and months in advance. It is a long process. However, if school construction is needed, school board members and superintendents owe it to the children of the 21st century to persist and move forward. Local projects will succeed only when they are understood and championed by local people. That will happen only when school superintendents and school board members embrace the importance of truly engaging and collaborating with the community. Formation of an effective, energized PAC is particularly critical in a capital projects referendum, where school involvement is limited by statute.