

Business Community and Community Leaders Provided Needed Support for Successful Referendum

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The business community and other leadership in Bloomington are given credit for overseeing a very successful school referendum (62% to 38%). Prior to any consideration of a referendum, the superintendent had accomplished a great deal of networking in the community. It was felt that two simultaneous campaigns were held, one externally and one internally: a community campaign and a political campaign. Two consistent messages were emphasized. The message to the business community focused on the relationship between a quality school corporation and a vibrant community. It stated that the campaign impacted not just the school corporation, but the entire community, for a quality workforce is provided by a quality school corporation, home values increase with a strong school district, and families begin moving out of the community when the school district is weak. The message to the general public, especially to the parents, pointed out the negative impact the failure of a referendum would have on class sizes and program offerings. Best practices are reported below.

1. The year prior to the referendum, focus groups were held in the community, as strategies were initiated to reduce expenses because of significant decreases in state funding. The needs were publicized using consistent messages. The management and board initiated \$5.8 million in budget cuts in February, cuts that were well publicized and presented through many community forums. Extracurricular stipends were part of the cut-backs, which were not very popular with a large segment of the community. Fortunately, the local education foundation provided \$675,000 to support the extracurricular programs (music, art, and athletics). This fund-raising effort limited the amount of funds that could be raised by the PAC.
2. The business community volunteered to take the lead for the referendum. The leadership from the community indicated that the business community, not the superintendent, should take the lead since the impact on the school corporation was a community issue.
3. There was total board support for the referendum. The superintendent stated that without 100% board support a referendum would be "dead in the water."
4. It was learned that the general public did not understand how a school works financially; therefore, it is important for a superintendent and board entering a referendum to constantly educate the public about the differences in the five funds. The superintendent used materials provided by an attorney at a FAIR, Inc. referendum workshop to simplify the information and educate the public.
5. The year prior to the referendum, the community was informed that budget cuts had eliminated more than 60 teaching positions, increased class size at all grade levels, forced the district to greatly reduce the programs available for most at-risk students, and cut district stipends for all extracurricular activities in athletics, arts and academic competition. Administrative positions were also reduced. These positions were not filled.

6. The superintendent attended all open houses to discuss the need for a referendum. Even though communication about the referendum had been publicized, it was reported that very few parents knew about the proposed referendum. The community forums were not well attended. Those in attendance at the forums who opposed the initial budget cuts and eventually a proposed referendum did not have any solutions to deal with the significant reduction in state funds.

7. The referendum was successful even though the school corporation had recently completed the construction of a new elementary school, transportation center and soccer field. This construction, however, was an issue for some of those who did not understand school budgets.

8. It was emphasized that it is important to have clear, concise and consistent messages. In addition, it is important that a superintendent keep the committee leadership and members on target. If not on target, it is like "herding cats." The superintendent has to keep repeating the message over and over.

9. The local Chamber of Commerce surveyed its membership and found that 68% of the membership would support a referendum. The Bloomington Economic Development Commission also supported the referendum. The superintendent attended all of the executive committee meetings, as well as the general meetings, of these two groups. Key individuals from these groups served on various referendum committees.

10. The local newspaper publisher was supportive of the referendum and was fair in reporting referendum-related information. The superintendent met with the editorial board prior to proposing a referendum to the community. It was felt that the editorial board was supportive because the needs had been demonstrated, the state funds had been significantly reduced, and the message was clear.

11. Additional meetings with politicians and significant business owners were held prior to the referendum. Most promised to be supportive, or at least neutral. The mayor was not only supportive but provided valuable suggestions relating to the campaign. Legislators provided information to the public, outlining the value of having a successful referendum.

12. The City Council and the County Council passed resolutions in support of the referendum. The superintendent and several high school students provided a presentation to the City and County Council members. The students mentioned class size reduction and extra-curricular participation needs. The three advisory committee chairpersons (see # 14 below) also attended the meetings. Presentations were made to other groups, such as the League of Women Voters, who were also supportive. Support was also received from the I.U. School of Education and the leadership of the Young Democrats.

13. It was felt to be significant that 12 union representatives supported the referendum. This support especially had a positive impact on the blue collar workers and voters. There was no visible opposition from any segment of the community. The support from the unions was a key to the success of the referendum.

14. The advisory committee had three members, plus the superintendent. Two of the three members were retired school superintendents and one previously had provided leadership to the ISTA organization. All three of them had university connections following retirement. They were well known in the community, actually state-wide, and had a very favorable impact on the retirement community and senior citizens, in particular. Two of them had had previous referendum experiences.

15. A retired principal provided leadership for the approximately 20-member PAC.

16. In March the superintendent began informing various groups and community leaders of the need for a referendum, so that there were no surprises. It was felt, however, that the referendum was on a "fast track" since the referendum was targeted for November, which was a recommendation made by the Bloomington mayor. The mayor recommended the referendum be held during the general election based upon what he knew about the community and previous elections. There was also a concern that the legislators might make the process more difficult and the barriers would negatively impact elections held in May following the November election.

17. It was emphasized that the superintendent and board need 12 to 18 months to prepare for a referendum. The superintendent reported, "We often felt like we were going 90 miles an hour down a highway and still putting on the wheels!"

18. Polling was done in June to determine the level of tolerance for a tax increase to support the referendum. It was found that 68% of the community indicated support for a 12- to 14-cent tax increase. Another poll conducted in September yielded similar results. The poll included only 10 questions. Due to the lack of funds, the phone bank was handled by volunteers. With available funds, however, a preference for using professionals for this task was stated.

19. Leading up to the referendum, a consultant was paid \$35,000 from the general fund. Pre-referendum activities included demographics, polling, program studies and several community meetings. Regarding the program studies, the community was invited to meetings where their input was solicited regarding various programs that might be eliminated. Using "clickers," community members could provide immediate feedback. Those attending were then placed in small groups for consensus-building activities.

20. Another \$35,000 was paid to two additional consultants who provided leadership for the referendum (nuts and bolts). It is important to consult with the school corporation's legal counsel regarding the legality of using school corporation funds.

22. During the campaign, press conferences were held every two weeks with each supportive group, i.e., Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Commission, unions, etc.

23. Editorials were submitted every two weeks.

24. The month of September was felt to be a time for education and October was the time for mobilization for a November election. Yard signs went out during the last two weeks of the campaign. Due to a lack of PAC funds, the yard signs were sold. An effort was made to place a sign in the yards of every teacher. About 600 signs were sold.

25. As stated above, the Referendum Campaign Committee had three members (not counting the superintendent). They met every Friday beginning in August. They each recruited membership for their three committees: Communication and Marketing, Get Out The Vote, and Canvassing.

26. As reported, it was a significant asset for the Communication and Marketing Committee to have someone with technology expertise, especially relating to developing the website, Facebook, Twitter, etc.

27. The Canvassing Committee members went door-to-door. This committee utilized voter history data. The superintendent reported, "It is important to target 'yes' voters and not waste time with those who don't vote." The campaign committee has limited time and should focus their funds where they will be most effective. When those involved in polling identified a non-supportive voter, that information was reported to the Canvassing Committee.

28. If requested, transportation and babysitting services were offered for those voting. As voters appeared at the voting locations, campaign workers requested that the voters support the school corporation's referendum. It was suggested that it would be beneficial if the campaign committee members could keep track of those voting (using technology, such as a Blackberry) in order to know which likely "yes" voters should be contacted to remind them to vote.

29. Prior to organizing activities at the polling locations, it is important to secure approval from the appropriate authorities.

30. Once the election has ended, it is important to complete a post-election analysis in order to begin planning strategies for the next campaign.