

Public Understands That the Perry Schools Belong to the Community

Metropolitan School District of Perry Township Dr. Thomas J. Little, Jr., Superintendent

The Perry Township board and administrative team were committed to developing and maintaining a balanced budget. Over the past three years, there was an aggressive plan developed to reduce over \$9 million in budget expenditures. Reductions totaling \$2.1 million in 2009 and \$7.1 million in 2010 were completed. The reductions produced a balanced budget in 2011 and reduced staff by 115, which significantly reduced programs.

However, significant facility needs remained. HVAC systems were fifty years old and desperately needed replacing. Roofs and swimming pools were leaking; science labs were outdated. We had safety and security needs. During this same time, the state notified the district in 2010 that their state funding was reduced by \$3.9 million. In addition, the district faced a loss of \$6.7 million in reductions due to desegregation funding loss. An additional \$10 million needed to be cut in order to balance the budget over the next six years.

Without any intent to have a referendum in 2011, the administration developed another list for a second round of potential cuts. Prior to moving forward with the additional budget balancing measures, the superintendent and school board members organized the Perry Schools Community Advisory Panel (PCAP), whose purpose was to analyze the budget and help determine what cuts to make. The panel consisted of 35 members from the community. Membership included community leaders, such as local business owners, classroom teachers' president, local media, alumni members, former retirees, governmental employees, civic organizational leaders, realtors and our high school student leaders.

The board members and superintendent selected the membership, with the goal to have a broad cross section of the community on the committee. The board members were aware that by creating a committee of this nature, they would have to be receptive to a new list of reductions. They were confident, however, that the committee members would adequately represent what the community would support. They were also aware that they had a stable community which had strong community pride. All of the committee meetings were held at the administrative offices. They met once a week and held 10 meetings.

During the first meeting, the superintendent and his staff informed the members about the status of the current budget and the expected decrease in revenue from the state. The superintendent emphasized that the schools belonged to the community and that the community should determine what they wanted for their children and what they wanted their community to look like.

The committee received a list of the second round of proposed cuts that was developed by the administration and were told that their expertise—through a new set of eyes—would be invaluable. The superintendent discussed the challenges and, to be transparent, provided as much data as needed, including the number of administrators and teachers. He commented, "Tell me what else we can cut. Maybe I'm too close to it." He also stated, "This is not a referendum committee. I just need your help with the budget and with the development of a list of what we can cut."

Some of the previous year's cuts had included elementary music and media staff. The current proposed list even included having one high school instead of two. Freshmen and sophomores would be in one building, and juniors and seniors would be in the other. This reportedly saved a lot of funds in the area of athletics.

The committee met bi-weekly, continuing to review the school corporation's budget and the list of potential reductions. After a few meetings, some of the members mentioned that a referendum was needed because the additional proposed budget cuts were unacceptable. The superintendent reminded the committee of the previously year's failed referendum and encouraged the committee to focus on the proposed budget reductions. Eventually, however, the entire committee echoed what was previously stated about needing a referendum and made a request to make a presentation to the school board. The board placed this group on the agenda and listened to their proposal. The community members stipulated that this 35-member group would run the referendum. This referendum was going to be a community referendum. The board approved the PCAP's request.

During the interview with the superintendent about the Perry referendum, he emphasized that he attended the meetings to serve the community. The committee members, he stated, provided the leadership for the referendum, not he. He said, "It should not be about the superintendent as the leader." He also stated, "You need to enable the leadership in the community to support the endeavor. If the community can't trust you with their money, they can't trust you with their kids."

The following was reported about the referendum campaign:

1. The 35-member PCAP became the campaign committee. A campaign consultant (wife of one of the committee members) became the chairperson.
2. The campaign consultant had experience in political campaigns and provided invaluable leadership to the committee.
3. Polling was done twice, once at the beginning and again about half way through the campaign. The polling was provided by an architectural company. It would have been beneficial if the pollsters had known more about the Perry schools and could have responded to various questions.

4. The campaign had twelve subcommittees, such as Parent Committee, Sign Distribution Committee, Yard Sign Committee, Poll Workers Committee, Voter Analysis Committee, and Outreach Committee.
5. The campaign was clearly “grass roots” and community-driven.
6. The Outreach Committee provided speakers for the community. Presentations were made to a large number of groups, including churches, retirement homes, and civic groups. The superintendent was also one of the available presenters.
7. The teachers’ association was very active and supportive. They sponsored a successful rally.
8. Members of one of the subcommittees went door to door.
9. The campaign focused on "yes" voters and "maybe" voters. This information was determined by a committee assigned to evaluate previous voter records.
10. The PCAP promoted the board and superintendent by publicizing, "Perry has a school board and superintendent you can trust."
11. Poll workers were assigned to observe the polls and contact individuals who had been identified as "yes" voters and who had not yet voted.
12. Students became active in the campaign. They created a video for the PCAP’s website. They also created a registration site. Over 600 students registered to vote.
13. The PCAP determined how much the school corporation could ask from the community. It was determined that the amount should be \$20 per month for a homeowner owning a home valued at \$131,000, which is the average home value in the community. The successful Construction Referendum was for \$50,000,000 and was approved by 57% of the voters. The amount sought for the General Fund Referendum was \$10,000,000 and was approved by 58% of the voters.
14. The superintendent met with local groups during the campaign, including legislators, realtors, ministers, and town council members.
15. Fund raising was important. Funds came from vendor donations, private donations, the teachers' association, and local business owners.
16. Four thousand yard signs were ordered and distributed. They could be ordered from the PCAP website. The signs stated, "Vote YES for Perry Schools."
17. Seven thousand five hundred (7,500) buttons and five hundred bumper stickers were ordered and distributed.

18. Car signs (\$25 for two) were sold and printed locally as needed.
19. Large posters were made for businesses. It was not uncommon for the business owners to request these posters for display.
20. Brochures and newsletters included information about the referendum.
21. Social media were utilized. We had over 1,000 “likes” from parents and other interested, concerned community members on our Facebook page.
22. Some opposition emerged, but not at a very visible level. A few "Vote NO—It’s a tax increase" signs appeared in some yards.
23. The PCAP will continue to meet quarterly to review the budget expenditures. The superintendent will continue to focus on being good stewards and providing transparency.
24. Following the successful referendum, signs appeared thanking the community for voting yes for Perry schools.
25. The school corporation's stationery states, “Our Community Supports Perry Schools.”

The superintendent reported that the teachers need to be vested. He stated that it is also very important to have had significant budget cuts prior to ever discussing a referendum with the community.

REMARKS

The state has significantly reduced the amount of funds going to public schools. Prior to a referendum, the community needs to know the impact. Transparency is important. For example, after significant reductions in state funds going to schools, the media informed the public that the state was increasing the funds going to the schools. Voters going into the voting booth likely felt the financial dilemma faced by Indiana schools had disappeared, since it was not clarified that the increase reported by the state was very limited and nowhere near the original amount. Having the PCAP in Perry made it easier to communicate this situation. The PCAP, for example, was informed that any increase in state aid would result in a comparable decrease in the amount of funds requested from the community.