



UTILIZING ROOM PARENTS IN REFERENDUM

INTRODUCTION

While there are restrictions relating to the PTO's or PTA's involvement in a referendum, there is no mention of restrictions relating to the use of parents, specifically "room parents" (or "room mothers"). Assuming the feasibility or facility study and community engagement processes were thorough and the community has been well informed, it should not be too difficult to get some of the school's most active parents, room parents, to become passionate and supportive of the project.

STRATEGY

There are numerous strategies for conducting a referendum campaign. One strategy would be for each principal to meet with his or her teaching staff to select two or three room parents from every classroom in that school. These parents, plus a few highly regarded teachers and principals, would meet with the room parents from all of the other schools after school hours and off school grounds to discuss ways to better inform all parents of the merits of the proposed project and to improve the percentage of voters who vote on Election Day. The organizational tasks should occur prior to the 1028 and preliminary determination hearing. This effort, while likely coordinated with the Campaign Steering Committee and the Political Action Committee, would be a separate group and likely involve different strategies.

KEY COMMUNICATORS

One of the room parents from each classroom would become a "key communicator" for communication and coordination purposes. The principal should participate in selecting this individual and not just ask for a volunteer. This person would also provide leadership to the other one or two room parents in developing an email list and phone number list. The list would be to call all the parents of children in that room on the day prior to Election Day and to also schedule information meetings with the parents. As key communicators, this person would be asked to work with the other one or two room parents in that room to schedule coffees (forums), in small groups, for all the parents and grandparents of the children in that room. In a school election, the only way to influence folks to support a tax increase is to inform them.

BELIEVING THE MESSENGER

Research has demonstrated that most people in the community give a high level of credibility to what is reported by a friend or by someone they know. People also tend to give a lot of credibility to what a significant number of other people are saying or reporting. Time needs to be given to make sure the key communicators have been receiving on-going information and have reliable, accurate information. One of the first ways to do this is to make sure they are involved in the public engagement process and are able to observe the process of involving the community in determining what the community supports and what it wants for its children. For example, one technique that is becoming more common is to invite large numbers of stakeholders to meetings where the project options are discussed and TurningPoint software is utilized. During this process, participants provide anonymous responses and provide real time feedback on the issues. The key communicators get to observe that everyone has an equal voice and is an active partner in determining priorities. The key communicators are also

provided an understanding of the community's opinions and preferences. Since the school corporation's website will include actual data about the project, the key communicators and the other room parents, can use that source during the coffees (forums). Additional information could also be found, if developed, on the PAC's website.

YOUR REFERENDUM BEGINS TODAY

Voters will respond more favorably to a proposed project if they feel good about their schools. Parents want safe and secure schools, a caring and dedicated staff, a quality instructional program, on-going communications, frequent reporting of student progress and attractive facilities (including classrooms). They also want to feel welcomed at school. Prior to considering a referendum, an assessment should occur as to whether the community is supportive of the schools and if your parents feel good about the staff and schools. You need to determine if you have the level of support that will motivate room parents to become passionate about the project.

While it is important for the superintendent to be networking with the community, it is also important for each staff member to do his or her part in creating a partnership with parents that will be critical to the success of the campaign. One beginning step would be to provide a resource to the teachers that are found on FAIR's website (FAIRIndiana.org) about teacher-parent communication (Found in appendices of **Educating the Community: A Superintendent's Guide to Gaining Public Support for Facilities**).

FEEDBACK REGARDING USING ROOM PARENTS

Ohio School Superintendent: "One of the approaches used in Ohio for referendum campaigns is to have parents conduct coffees in their homes to share information and gather input from the community."

Community Engagement Specialist for an Architectural Firm: "This is an excellent idea. Using room parents never has to compromise the PTA/PTO groups at all. Phone numbers and email addresses can come from the school district's files if they share them prior to the 1028. The list of "room parents" could be given to the PAC for continuous updates, information and campaign events. I like that the responsibility for room parents is very manageable. Only 24-25 contacts will need to be made by each room parent, actually less since there may be as many as three room parents involved in the campaign. Peer to peer campaigning is nearly always the most effective approach, particularly when dealing with elementary parents."

Attorney: "The room parents should be recruited before the 1028 and preliminary determination hearing. The key is to make sure the principals aren't using the school's email system to communicate with the room parents after the 1028 and preliminary determination hearing. The room parents should set-up the email and phone lists prior to the 1028 and the preliminary determination hearing. The PTO/PTA officers and members can communicate all they want with parents off the school grounds. One caution is that the PTO/PTA is an organization which uses school facilities, and therefore can't spend money to promote the project. The principals should remind the PTO/PTA officers that they can't spend their money on the campaign but they can use the 'communication network' to get out the word about the project."