

Previous Cost Containment Strategies and School Board Involvement Resulted in One of Indiana's Largest Referendum Approval Rate

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For those considering a referendum, the Sheridan school board members will tell you that board members should be very involved and should be prepared for activities similar to running for a school board election. They will also emphasize that the effort should be for the kids. The superintendent feels that the number one reason Sheridan had a successful referendum was due to the board's being out front with the campaign and having high credibility in the community. Sheridan's referendum was approved by 73% of the voters.

During the year prior to the referendum, the school corporation's budget was cut to bare bones. This cut reduced multiple budgets and staffs, including teachers and administrators. When attempting to operate the school corporation without going into deficit spending, all options were considered, including possible consolidation with one of the neighboring school corporations.

Some of the suggested best practices relating to Sheridan's very successful operating referendum are as follows:

1. Strategic planning began in August. Four pillars were reviewed: finance, facilities, curriculum and communications. Goals and objectives were then developed for the school year.
2. A board member with a marketing background chaired the referendum planning committee.
3. Referenda strategies in other communities were reviewed, as were the political strategies used in another community for the election of a mayor.
4. An administrator from another school corporation that experienced a successful referendum provided guidance to the group. This administrator had previously worked for the Sheridan Community Schools.
5. No consultants were utilized for the referendum. An attorney was utilized to guide the board and superintendent through the legal processes.
6. Instead of identifying 200 to 300 stakeholders for face-to-face meetings, as is done with some referenda, the planning committee decided to meet with as many individuals as possible. There was no reason for voters in Sheridan not to know about the purpose of the referendum.
7. Since the previous budget cuts had been so extensive, additional budget cuts would have been significantly disruptive to many educational programs, especially class sizes. Therefore, consolidation with a neighboring school corporation had to be one of the considerations. This possibility, no doubt, impacted the level of support for the successful referendum.

8. The approach in getting voter support was very grassroots.
9. Grade level chairs were identified. Their job was to inform the parents of students in each grade level and to get those parents to the polls. The grade level chairs sent out emails and letters and made phone calls. The PAC included the grade level chairs and the planning committee.
10. Voter data from previous elections were collected but not utilized. Instead of focusing just on "yes" voters, there was a focus on the entire community. However, due to the use of grade level chairs, there was an obvious focus on parents of school children, since they tend to be strong "yes" voters. A goal was to get as many "yes" votes as there were students in the school corporation.
11. The rural community around Sheridan was generally supportive. This was likely due to having a farmer on the school board who is highly regarded in the community and was supportive of the referendum.
12. Presentations were made to groups in the community, including faith groups.
13. The school corporation's website had factual data about the referendum, including a tax calculator.
14. The superintendent sent emails to parents about the school corporation's financial situation. No statements were made on the website about the need to support the referendum. The website had a tab that would link to a separate website that was developed by the planning committee. The planning committee was aware that any opposition group could request a similar link to their website.
15. The actual campaign strategies did not begin until six weeks prior to the voting activities. There was a quiet time following the flow of information to the community. Visible campaign strategies did not begin until three weeks prior to the polls' being open. Public community information meetings were held in September, October and early November.
16. When meeting in the community, the planning committee also distributed a tri-fold flyer that included the school corporation's goals. Information told the community "how we got here," "what we have done," "what will happen if we win," and "what will happen if we lose".
17. When meeting with groups, a Referendum Volunteer Information sheet was distributed that asked for volunteers, including asking for the names of ten people they would talk to about the referendum to gain their support. The theme was, "Go out and touch someone."
18. Data were provided regarding Sheridan's tax rates with neighboring communities, including the school corporations' tax rates. A 19-cent increase was being proposed. It was pointed out that Sheridan changed, due to budget cuts, from having some of the smallest class sizes to having some of the largest class sizes.
19. Yard signs were placed in strategic locations in the community. These signs went up three weeks prior to the election. The yard signs were two-sided and cost \$5 each. The signs stated, "Invest in Us. Our kids, our town, our traditions." The PAC especially wanted signs placed at the homes or businesses of individual's influential in the community, including in the farming community. Four hundred bright and sturdy yard signs were ordered.

20. The staff supported the referendum. As with many other school corporations, the majority of teachers do not live in the community. The staff did not receive a pay raise for a couple of years. The superintendent took a decrease in salary.
21. One goal was to be as transparent and accurate as possible. It was felt that the committee initially provided too much information at the meetings. The Power Point presentation was modified to avoid losing the interest of those in the audiences. It is very important to be truthful and honest.
22. A brochure was developed and available upon request. The information in the brochure was also placed on the website.
23. It was found that most negative comments made during public meetings were beneficial to the campaign, since they helped the committee to clear up misinformation in the community.
24. The grade level chairs used Facebook, but not Twitter. These individuals made door-to-door contacts.
25. Former board members worked at the polls. Their involvement had a positive impact. Other workers were also present. Unlike some other campaigns, the campaign members did not keep track of those voting and did not call individuals on polling day to remind them to vote. The primary reason was that voters were reminded via emails a few days prior to the election.
26. Teachers were active with social media but not on school time. They also contacted former students from the previous three graduation classes. They mailed 1,000 post cards. The cost of the cards and postage was provided by an outside organization.
27. The website included a section for the most frequently asked questions. The tri-fold flyer listed the dates and locations for public community information meetings, a summary of reductions that had taken place, what voting "yes" means, what would happen with a failed referendum, a summary of the states' continued reduction in funding, state support comparisons, and a sample of the homeowners' monthly tax impact for homes valued at \$75,000, \$100,000, \$150,000, \$200,000 and \$250,000. The monthly tax impact, for example, on a home valued at \$100,000 was \$5.19. The names of supporters were also listed on the flyer.