

Year-Long Cost Containment Committee, Principal Leadership, and Prior Referendum Experience Brought Positive Results for Westfield Washington

Dr. Mark Keen, Superintendent
Westfield Washington Schools (WWS)

At least a year prior to initiating a referendum in the Westfield community, cost containment strategies and networking began. A Cost Containment Committee formed in May 2009, including administration, teachers, and parents, had been working to determine how expenditures could be reduced without sacrificing the quality of a WWS education. Everything was on the table except teacher positions, which would only be a “last resort” consideration. The superintendent took the proposed cuts to the board for approval. This action was reported in the local newspaper. The community was informed of the efforts of the superintendent and the management team to be financially prudent, especially given the significantly reduced amount of funds being provided by the state. The superintendent and board members had always considered active community networking a priority and had established strong, positive relationships with many sectors of the community. Using this networking to their advantage, they began the logical outreach of educating the community about the school corporation’s financial condition; they also began identifying community organizations and leaders who would support their efforts to recoup locally some of the funds no longer being provided at the state level.

Some of the suggested best practices relating to Westfield Washington’s successful operating referendum are as follows:

1. The number one goal was to run a positive campaign.
2. Through the efforts of the Cost Containment Committee, reductions had already been made in instructional, maintenance, and personnel areas. Parents and teachers were represented on the Cost Containment Committee.
3. Through public board sessions, the possible need and ongoing consideration of a potential referendum were publicized through media coverage, creating an opportunity for public opinion. Reactions and conversations were monitored to assess public reaction long before a commitment and announcement of a referendum.
4. Westfield Washington’s main campaign strategy focused on educating everyone (parents, community members, especially the faculty), particularly working with and educating the building PTOs; focusing on securing the “yes” votes of faculty, graduates, and parents; informing the public about the voting process and timelines; using technology as a primary means of communication; and effectively using the district website as real time transparency.
5. While there was an effort to get all parents to the polls, there were additional reminders to the mothers to make sure their husbands voted, as history suggested that often mothers were more directly informed about school matters than fathers.

6. It was felt that the biggest enemy to a successful referendum would be misinformation and apathy from the parents and teachers.
7. It was believed that holding the referendum during an election in May would yield a higher percentage of “yes” votes than having the referendum during a general election.
8. It was suggested that it is advisable to avoid a referendum whenever there is a board election.
9. It was felt that when you approach individuals and ask them to endorse the referendum, if they don’t agree, at least they are more likely to remain neutral since you have provided them with the facts.
10. The community received a consistent message that voting “yes” would mean controlling class size, preventing layoffs and teacher cuts, keeping students competitive, supporting growing enrollments, maintaining technology, and replacing a portion of lost funding.
11. Most of the active campaigning and display of signs occurred during the two weeks just prior to the opening of the polls.
12. The referendum committee focused on the accomplishments of the community and school partnerships, having the principals and teachers as the main voice and distributors of information, highlighting the accomplishments of the students and the district, and emphasizing how financially responsible the corporation had been over the past decade.
13. An important, oft repeated clarification was that by 2011 the school district would have lost over \$7 million in funding. With the referendum the school was seeking to replace a portion of this lost funding; the amount needed was \$4.6 million.
14. No professional consultant was used nor did formal polling occur for the campaign. As clarification, the superintendent had previous out-of-state referendum experience and conducted much informal polling through the superintendent and referendum committee members’ discussions and meetings with various groups and individuals.
15. No school corporation funds were utilized in support of the campaign. Approximately \$9000 was raised, primarily from vendors; publications, signs, and campaign expenses were paid from PAC (Political Action Committee) funds.
16. Principals were the lead communicators for staff and parents, since principals have a closer relationship with parents than a steering committee might have.
17. The PTO members and teachers were the “ears” for the campaign. Every time it was reported that someone was spreading or discussing misinformation, campaign leadership contacted and/or met with these individuals directly, offering clear explanation of the facts.
18. The PTOs sponsored two public forums.

19. Most households received a tri-fold publication, which included information about the need for a referendum and the district's efforts for informing the public. This publication appears on the FAIRIndiana.org website.
20. Both the referendum's web page and the tri-fold publication provided testimonials from various individuals in the community.
21. The school district had a Facebook page that reached nearly 2500 people. Six referendum committee support people were responsible for daily monitoring of Facebook and other social media. They simply responded with facts and avoided any criticism of those reporting misinformation.
22. The referendum website was an evolving document, updated and changed regularly in order to keep people visiting the site. It included FAQs, testimonials, facts about school finance, history of Cost Containment Committee efforts, letters to the editor, a video explaining the referendum, and a video message from the board president. A committee of parents met and provided feedback to the leadership as to what questions would need to be answered in the community. That parent committee also provided direction in writing the Q&As in non-jargon language easily understood by those less familiar with educational settings. The parents provided insight throughout the campaign, and the Q&A section was frequently extended to respond to commonly heard conversations which suggested a need for further clarification.
23. The leadership of the referendum committee focused on assuring that the community understood the connection between property values and a quality school system. Publications and discussion points included reference to a 2009 edition of *The Journal of Real Estate Research*, which reported that 8 to 20 percent of a home's value can be tied to the reputation of the school system. Publications provided the calculated tax impact on four ranges of homes typical in the community: \$150,000, \$200,000, \$250,000, and \$350,000. The emphasis and consistent message were that the tax impact was considerably less than most people believed with, for example, a home costing \$200,000 projected to be \$18.73. In addition, the district website provided an interactive calculator where homeowners could determine the exact impact on their personal taxes.
24. The committee leadership drew upon the long-held, generous accessibility to school buildings and grounds for local youth organizations. They reached out to those organizations, addressing concerns that there could be less access if significant cuts were a result of a failed referendum. However, the most important element of the outreach was the partnering with the organizations to use their substantial email lists and their connection to parents of kids not yet in school. Much unsolicited support for the referendum was circulated through those groups, and no organized opposition came from those areas.
25. Government classes at the high school had a long-term practice of helping eligible students register to vote each year. For the referendum, the classes pushed to get absentee voters and to encourage citizens, especially college kids, to vote early. An email outreach to graduates from the previous three years provided steps for absentee voting and reasons for doing so.

26. Teachers and retired teachers sent letters and post cards to parents and others in the community asking them to support the referendum.
27. A booth was set up at most school sporting and performance events. The booth had a banner and provided factual information about the referendum. There was no effort to distribute any literature outside of the booth at the events, thus maintaining the focus on the students and avoiding criticism of distraction.
28. Letters to the editor were submitted during the last two weeks of the campaign (one each day). A bank of letters was encouraged by the referendum committee and writers were reminded of procedures and timing for submission to area papers.
29. Approximately 1000 yard signs went up on a Sunday night two weeks prior to Election Day. The signs read, "Vote Yes, Invest in Quality." An additional sticker was added to many of the signs about a week later, which read, "Teacher Recommended." Yard signs were placed only in the yards of consenting homes. No signs appeared on public property. Business cards, which had the same "Invest in Quality" logo as the sign and included referendum committee talking points on the reverse side, were distributed.
30. PAC provided banners thanking the community for supporting the referendum. They were visible the day after the referendum and for about ten days in all.
31. The referendum committee committed to immediate removal of yard signs, and all signs were picked up within 72 hours. Many positive comments came from the community, thanking the school for that effort.
32. Regarding doing anything differently, the referendum committee would have worked more specifically to register voters, spent more time educating private school parents, and gone to more local morning hang-outs to reach community members without school-aged children.
33. New parents moving to the community are now registered to vote at the school district's office.
34. The district administration will continue to work through the established Cost Containment Committee to demonstrate to the community the commitment to continued fiscal responsibility. Enhanced steps will be taken to publicize how post-referendum funding is impacting the schools and how those decisions are made. The administration will be diligent in assuring that district staff and community members know they have not suddenly returned to the status quo.

Below are the Email Thank You, Yard Sign, Window Cling & Brochure used during campaign:



Mark The Date:
Tuesday, November 2, 2010

Invest in Quality Brochure

How did we get here?

Reduction of state funding

State funding has dropped \$444 per student. With over 6,000 students, this is a loss of \$2,664,000. Projections for 2011 have the district bracing for an additional drop of \$150 per student.

Loss of new facility appeals

In the past, growing school districts were able to appeal for additional money to operate the new schools built to accommodate growth. The appeal process was discontinued by the legislature and cost Westfield \$635,614.

Property tax reform

In 2009, the property tax cap was applied by the state legislature. While reducing many residential tax bills, it reduced WWS funding by the following:

2009 - \$ 66,125
 2010 - \$1,498,155
 2011 - \$3,390,166

Loss of interest income

Due to significantly reduced interest rates, Westfield's interest income has dropped by \$700,000.

HOMEOWNER REFERENDUM TAX IMPACT

Home Value	Annual Cost	Monthly Cost
\$350,000	\$449.07	\$37.42
\$250,000	\$299.57	\$24.96
\$200,000	\$224.82	\$18.73
\$150,000	\$150.07	\$12.50

Based on a tax rate of 23 cents per \$100, raising \$4.6 million.



Visit us on the web:
www.wwsreferendum.com

Testimonials...

"Our schools, teachers, and administrators are among the best anywhere. We want to be sure that we keep the highest quality education opportunities possible in the future. We encourage the very careful management and care of finances when so many are facing hard times. We also encourage each family to examine and study the referendum and do what is best for all."

- John A. & Donita Hlatt, Community Members

"We've looked at other districts, mainly for a bigger house for a growing family, but we've stayed because being a special needs parent - all that matters is the services your child receives. And we can't find any better services than here in Westfield. What they've done for our son has been phenomenal."

- Mathew & Michelle Foley, Westfield Parents

"I received six credit hours by successfully completing AP Biology and History classes while at Westfield High School. I also tested out of two semesters of Spanish. By completing this coursework while in high school, it reduces the amount of time and money I will have to spend at the University of Alabama to satisfy my graduation requirements."

- Nicholas Reith, Westfield Class of 2010 Graduate

"Thanks to the commitment towards technical excellence in our schools, our 13 year old son Cameron has worked with Edutopia and Lucasfilm, and has started his own video/production business. As parents, we hope our district will continue to receive adequate funding so that our two daughters, along with other students, will be able to benefit from similar opportunities."

- Kevin & Debbie Murray, Westfield Parents



WESTFIELD WASHINGTON SCHOOLS 2010 Operating Referendum



Support Quality on November 2, 2010
 Vote "YES"!

www.wwsreferendum.com

Paid for by the Westfield Invest In Quality
 Political Action Committee (PAC)

Voting yes means...



- Controlling class size
- Preventing layoffs and teacher cuts
- Keeping our students competitive
- Supporting growing enrollment
- Maintaining technology
- Replacing a *portion* of lost funding



Fast facts...

Funding

Westfield Washington Schools ranks 330th out of 349 Indiana school districts in the amount of funding received per student.

Why?

Due to rapid growth in Washington Township, the state legislation funding formula is not keeping up with growing school districts.

Achievement

Westfield Washington Schools ranks 10th out 349 Indiana school districts passing ISTEP+.



What is an operating referendum?

An operating referendum allows school districts the ability to ask, with voter approval, for additional funds to cover essential district operating costs.

Why is a referendum needed?

By 2011, we will have lost over \$7 million in funding. With the referendum, we want to replace a portion (not all) of this lost funding. The amount we need is \$4.6 million.

We want to maintain the quality education, teachers and programs we have in place.

That said, we have already made reductions in instructional, maintenance and personnel areas that will not return.

Westfield Washington Schools has been doing more with less for a long time. Now we need the support from voters, through an operating referendum, to maintain what we have.

What happens if the referendum does not pass?

- Class sizes will increase
- Layoffs and teacher cuts will occur
- Our students will lose their competitive edge
- Programs will be cut
- Technology will be reduced

STATE SUPPORT COMPARISON (PER STUDENT)

\$5,006 WWS State Support

\$5,864 Average Indiana Schools State Support
(The amount of funding received per student across the state ranges from \$4,900 to \$9,000.)

\$5,700 WWS Referendum + State Support

More FAQs are located at www.wwsreferendum.com



These are great tools to guide a successful operating/general fund referenda campaign.