Why School Referenda Fail: Research and Best Practices for Success

Results of tax referenda over time vary significantly from state to state for a variety of reasons. In any given year, however, upwards of 50% of all school referenda seeking operating money or bonding are unsuccessful.

Some factors such as demographics, the economy, anti-tax politics and the presence of organized opposition are contributing factors and out of a district’s control. Other factors, including harnessing research-based best practices and understanding how to capture and effectively use available data sets are mostly or fully within control of leadership and the school board. Below are 10 key research-based factors associated with unsuccessful referenda. And if you are wondering why not the “Top 10 Tips for Winning,” read on after going through the list below!

Why School Referenda Fail...

1 Lack of unanimity and support from school board

Split school boards, factions of the school board working against the referendum or perceptions that the school board is not united and supportive negatively impact referenda. Split school boards give the uninformed within the community a reason to oppose.

2 Lack of alignment in ballot proposal

Alignment in a school district’s ballot proposal has two dimensions: (1) how the new money is going to be used; and (2) the tax impact associated with the requested investment in the public schools. It is critically important that the school board and administration get both components of alignment right. One way to inform the decision about the ballot proposal is to use a well-designed scientific, random-sample survey.

3 Failure to demonstrate a compelling need and consequences (positive and negative) of the referendum

Unlike political campaigns, in which voters can identify with party affiliation and perceptions about the past record and qualifications of the candidate, school referenda are reliant on information alone: (1) What is being proposed? (2) How will the money be used? (3) Why is it necessary; and (4) How much will it cost me? To convince voters to voluntarily raise their taxes to invest in public schools requires clear and compelling information. No voter should go to the polls uninformed.

4 Controversy, lack of trust or “climate” issues within the school district and between the school district and the community

Contentious issues are part and parcel to the business of running a school district and more problematic in times of financial stress. It is incumbent on the school board, administration and staff to be mutually supportive, proactively anticipate and solve problems before they become unmanageable, initiate quality control systems and work to strengthen relationships internally and within the community to offset the negative impact of inevitable distractions.
5 Poor public relations, communications or hostile local media
Research clearly demonstrates the importance of effective and ongoing communications and public engagement as a foundation from which to launch a successful referendum. Maintaining a respectful and positive relationship with local media is also linked to success over time.

6 Referendum conducted prematurely
It takes the time it takes to get it right. Waiting until the school district is ready, with the prerequisite foundation in place, is best practice if the school board has the luxury of having a legitimate choice about moving forward now or waiting until the school district is better prepared and positioned for success.

7 Inadequate planning, execution and commitment of resources (time, talent and treasure) by school district
Executing successful referenda is complex, challenging and dependent on good planning and the commitment of human and financial resources. Coordination between the school district’s administration of the referendum and the advocacy work of the campaign committee is paramount.

8 Inadequate planning, execution and commitment of resources (time, talent and treasure) by campaign committee
Most successful school referenda are dependent upon a grassroots advocacy group organized to support the referendum proposal in coordination with the school district. Planning and executing a winning campaign requires commitment, expertise and sufficient resources, particularly in the “Big Three.” (communications, canvassing and GOTV) Poor execution of GOTV (Get out the vote), resulting in lower than optimal turnout of key voter targets, is often a contributing factor to defeat.

9 Demographics and socioeconomic factors
There are many demographic and socioeconomic factors that affect the outcome of referenda. Examples would include the age, education, affluence of the community or the number of public school families within the school district. The health of the economy and consumer confidence in the months leading up to a referendum not only influence the outcome, but also help the school district and campaign committee understand how steep the challenge is in terms of being successful on Election Day.

10 Critical or unexpected events
Factors totally outside of the control of the school district can occur and adversely affect the outcome of a referendum. These critical or unexpected events could range from a stock market crash, (“Black Monday”) to a critical international, national or local event (9/11) to efforts to torpedo the school district’s proposal by organized opposition.

So inquiring minds want to know...
Why emphasize these ten, research-based factors associated with unsuccessful school referenda rather than focusing on the positive in terms of the “Top 10 Tips for Winning” as referenced in the opening paragraph?

Two reasons:
First, while the professional literature is replete with such “how to” lists (including some I have authored!), the tips are often anecdotal rather than research-based, and they tend to be tactical (e.g., our teachers took out an advertisement in the local paper) rather than “big picture” strategic.

Second, experience over time has taught me that starting with broad factors associated with unsuccessful referenda motivates school leaders to process how each factor will or could influence a future referendum in their unique environment, and then to strategically plan to eliminate or minimize the potential negative impact of a given factor. The challenge and opportunity for school leaders is to understand and analyze contextual factors (e.g., wealth, age, education level) not within the district’s control and then to act strategically on the mirror images of the factors listed above, developing a comprehensive referendum plan on a foundation of research and best practice.

And speaking of research and best practice, it is imperative to realize that in most school districts parents represent only 15 – 30% of all registered voters. Developing a winning strategy for your referendum is greatly enhanced when school leaders understand how to access and use voter data obtained from public and commercial sources in order to identify a campaign target structure that extends beyond just parents. Your voter target structure can then be harnessed by powerful geovisual software tools to support execution of canvassing, communications and GOTV.

About the Author: Dr. Don Lifto, Ph.D., is a consultant with Springsted Incorporated and GuideK12. He previously served as a superintendent for 25 years and is author of School Finance Elections: A Comprehensive Planning Model for Success, 2nd Edition. He can be reached at 651-303-3721 or dlifto@springsted.com.