



## Communication Must be a Two-Way Street

*Put it before them briefly so that they will read it, clearly so that they will appreciate it, picturesquely so that they will remember it, and above all, accurately so that they will be guided by its light.*

— Joseph Pulitzer

**B**oards of education in each of our communities serve as the link between the school system and the public. Boards build public understanding and support for public education, lead the public in demanding better education and help to establish a climate for change when change is necessary. To be effective, boards must, through formal and informal means, keep their local citizenry informed and keep themselves informed about the wishes of the public.

Boards of education face today, more than ever, financial challenges. The need to make cuts in programs, services and staff positions, exceed the revenue limits — or both — are topics of discussion in communities across the state. Communication becomes the key activity in both scenarios. Timely and effective communication goes a long way toward helping all those who will be affected understand why cuts must be made or why the district is planning a referendum to exceed the revenue limits.

### Stoughton's Referendum

In February 2005, the Stoughton Area Schools board took to the public, via referendum, the question to exceed revenue limits, or not, to continue operating the schools as they were. The electorate overwhelmingly said, "No," with a 2-to-1 vote against the proposal.

To prepare for the vote, the board did what it had always done successfully. The board, working collaboratively with administration and Robert W. Baird, our financial advisor, had worked hard to assemble data and graphs, deploy a PowerPoint presentation, print handouts, visit civic groups and parent groups in our schools, present at the senior center and generate pick-up information that was left strategically around town. Board members talked with a variety of groups, sharing information, while the board president wrote a regular column for the local newspaper each of the four weeks prior to the election; we answered questions at public hearings focused on the reason for a referendum, the projected deficits looking out four years, and the solution we were seeking: to exceed the revenue limits.

The board followed these exact same steps for several successful referendums in the past. In February 1996, we passed a \$25.6 million upgrade to existing schools, built two new middle schools, and added an auditorium and science wing to the high school. In April 1999, the community said "yes" to \$335,000 to renew the 1892 high school. In April 2001 we passed a \$2.5 million facilities referendum. In November 2002, the community agreed to a \$4.5 million referendum to replace an old, disintegrating, and non-WIAA-compliant swim-

ming pool at the high school.

We believed that, when presented with complete information, the community generously supported our public schools. We found out we were wrong.

What had changed? What had we missed? We needed to learn quickly as we do not expect our funding woes to vanish.

### First Things First

After the failed referendum, we needed to make \$1.2 million in total cuts in order to balance the budget. We did. We told the community about the process we would follow; we followed it. We made the cuts, only to find out subsequently that the governor's budget eased the gap between revenue and expenses.

The board discussed over several meetings how to get feedback from the community on the referendum. We knew we had to engage taxpayers and learn what they were thinking. The superintendent suggested more than a few avenues that the board might consider. Still, we hesitated. We were not anxious to spend money on consultants or marketing gurus. We decided to devise our own tool and to deploy it in the schools, in a few public places in town, through the local shopper, and on the district Web site. We decided a focus on sample size and statistical significance could wait for our next venture into community feedback.

While the board was very interested in querying stakeholders on many local school issues, we stayed focused on the referendum: who voted yes and why; who voted no and why; and a few demographic questions to learn who was

responding. We placed feedback forms printed on color-coded paper in different locations to learn which locations produced the largest number of responses.

### Survey Lessons

Almost 700 people responded; the ratio of those who voted for and against the referendum was mirrored in the ratio of the numbers responding. The two largest response categories were: a) people who voted for the referendum and had children in the schools (159) and b) people voting against the referendum who expected the board to make cuts before asking the voters for more money (291). The locations that were most frequently used were the post office box (187) and the district Web site (173), while the location used least was the high school (2). Demographically speaking, people with children in elementary schools and people without any children in our schools answered in very nearly the same proportion (201 to 193).

When designing the feedback tool, an "other, please specify" opportunity was presented. This board continues to winnow and sift through these comments in order to learn from this loss and to shape communication strategies to support future referendums.

Our survey tool is available at [www.wasb.org/bookstore/school-news/feb06wsn/surveysample.pdf](http://www.wasb.org/bookstore/school-news/feb06wsn/surveysample.pdf).

### Thinking Big

Clearly, the Stoughton board experienced disconnect with its voters. The research of the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) may guide next steps. The Lighthouse Project, now in its third phase, is analyzing board leadership behaviors in districts with high student achievement and board leadership behaviors in districts with low student achievement. The intent is to answer the question, "Do school boards affect student achievement?"

The Lighthouse Project researchers have identified seven conditions that are common to successful organizations in general, including school districts. Sustainable organizations and high-achieving school districts can be recognized as sharing these characteristics:

- shared leadership and shared decision-making;
- continuous improvement;
- ability to create and sustain initiatives;
- supportive workplaces for staff;
- staff development;
- use of data and information to support sites; and
- involved communities.

School board members' knowledge and beliefs in districts where student achievement is improving differ from those of their colleagues in districts where student achievement is "stuck." In Wisconsin, there will be a pilot to examine these premises and collect more data to test them. This Lighthouse phase three has the potential to shape the board experience in a new and exciting way. In the interim, let's look at what is meant by involving the community.

### Community Conversation

The Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) November conference, *Creating Winning Relationships*, offered an opportunity for further learning on referendum planning. Kit Dunn's presentation, *Think Strategically in Your Quest to Yes*, pointed to nationwide trends affecting K-12 education. Lots of nodding was visible in the audience as these trends were listed:

- Aging and outdated facilities
- Significant enrollment growth or decline
- Increasing accountability (No Child Left Behind)
- Increasing special education costs
- Anti-tax environment

- Aging population
- Deficit spending
- National/state economic and political concerns
- Voter apathy

Dunn was direct in her advice about the critical elements for successful referendums:

1. Establishing board of education unity and consensus;
2. Setting a realistic and parallel time frame for project development and effective information sharing;
3. Taking the pulse of the community, modifying plans;
4. Communicating the needs early and often;
5. Developing a comprehensive communication plan, based on clear, concise and consistent messages; and
6. Providing facts, figures and final decisions.

Take a good look at number 4: "Communicating the needs early and often." "Communicating with" and "involving" the community in referendum planning and decisions raise questions: How are these concepts alike? How do they differ? Do they intersect? Communication that involves the community, communication that engages the community, communication that creates allies and advocates requires thoughtful planning. Start communicating needs and issues well before decisions are finalized. Keep messages clear and consistent. Every message must be built on the solid foundations of facts, figures and a compelling story. In addition, board members must understand their stakeholders' perspectives, their expectations, competing agendas and attention span.

Communication is more than telling the community the plans or saying, "Please support us! Remember to vote!" To be effective, communication must get and use input from the community; it must become a genuine two-way conver-



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sation. The strategic plan your board embraces needs to commit to open, ongoing two-way communication. Boards need to provide specific information; it is best to put your ideas in writing — only include things you can commit to 100 percent. Ask for input. Listen actively. Respond with sincerity. Continue to communicate.

Use multiple media to reach diverse audiences. Use the district Web site and cable station; hold public meetings frequently. Include referendum facts with every building newsletter, every issue. Capture citizen input and use it to shape talking points. Develop a specific referendum mission statement and logo. Show up at commu-

nity events, special dates and activities. Understand your internal and external target audiences. Manage the news media. Highlight your stakeholders' roles in the final plan. Offer daytime school tours and open house meetings in the schools. Use print, Web, e-mail, DVD — leave no stone unturned.

Anticipate opponents' messages, even distortions. Have information sheets and news releases prepared in advance. For every referendum campaign, it is possible to craft a community-based message by soliciting, listening and responding to community input.

Remember, to be effective, boards must, through formal and informal means, keep their local

citizenry informed and keep themselves informed about the wishes of the public. ■

## RESOURCES

*An Introduction to Wisconsin Public School Boards*, WASB, September 2000

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