



Referendum Success

How to get what you need from your citizens' committee

Today, most school board members and administrators recognize the challenges that come with the quest for referendum success. Whether your district is asking for a rate increase or permission to issue bonds, obtaining an affirmative vote equates to asking voters for a commitment to your cause. Voting "no" requires little work or thought by voters, which is naturally much easier to accomplish!

Most people know that school districts cannot spend public dollars to promote a ballot question. Districts do have the right, actually the responsibility, to provide taxpayers with factual information about the referendum request. Presenting needs, providing facts and figures, and sharing the rationale for the questions are all appropriate messages the district should include in its comprehensive public information effort.

In many communities, the formation of an independent citizens' group, serving as a designated political action committee (PAC) or 501(c)3 organization, plays a critical role in achieving positive results on Election Day. This group can effectively broaden the district's communication efforts by reinforcing the issues at hand and repeating the campaign's key messages. Yet the most powerful impact of this group

comes not from mirroring the district's own efforts, but carrying the message to the next level by saying everything the district cannot. **The committee can directly ask for voter support.**

How do you keep a well-intentioned citizens' committee focused? Here are a few suggestions:

- Provide the committee with the background and details necessary for volunteers to develop a compelling and motivating story.
- Get-out-the-yes-vote strategies demand one-on-one interaction and revolve around existing relationships. Phone banks are impersonal, time consuming, and often irritating to callers. And with the rise in telemarketing and advent of caller ID, most people screen their calls.
- Citizen groups should realistically assess their membership and commitment level. As it forms, the committee should evaluate the number of volunteers needed, as well as experience with past referenda, local leadership and influence, and various talents and capabilities. Armed with this information, the group can determine the most productive use of its members' time and energy.
- The group should streamline its activities to correlate with its identified strengths and the

amount of time for campaigning. What activities allow committee members to influence the most reliable voters? Will door-to-door neighborhood canvassing be more effective than calling registered voters? Is there a budget for mailers, yard signs, and outdoor boards?

- This group can seek influential public endorsements in the form of letters to the editor, ads in local newspapers, and even radio public service announcements.

It's important to remember that your citizens' committee consists of volunteers who believe in your school district and the referendum itself. Even the most energetic district supporter can suffer from referendum burnout without a balanced information effort by your district. Help the group's members to focus on their true goal — motivating "yes" voters to get to the polls — by providing clear, consistent, factual information directly to all district stakeholders. While the district may not do this work, a dynamic approach by an independent citizens' group can help you achieve referendum success. ■

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