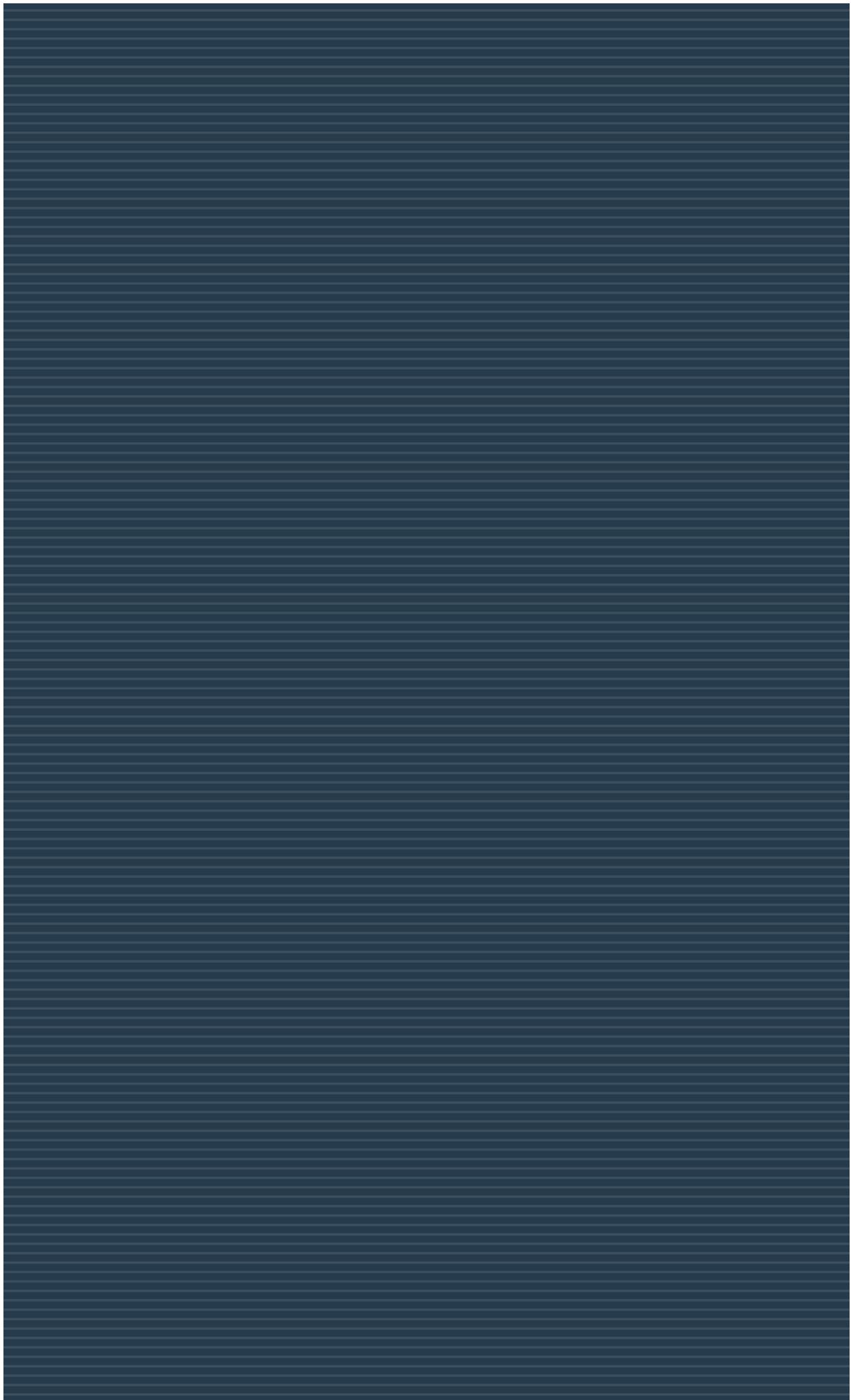


RAPID REFERENDUM RESPONSE

What to do when your district
is blindsided
by anti-referendum attacks



*How school districts can deal with
organized referendum opposition
while keeping their eyes on the prize:
a high-quality educational environment
for all students*



Background

Inadequate education funding resources and increasing district educational expenses continue to force school districts across Minnesota to turn to their voters for locally approved levy and bond requests. The referendum campaigns that result—both district-sponsored information and citizen-sponsored advocacy—have begun to attract a new breed of organized opposition.

Good preparation is critical for any referendum attempt. Start with good planning, ensure your community relations program is solid before you embark on a referendum and become familiar with some of the tactics being used to defeat school referendums.

This “Rapid Referendum Response” booklet can help you anticipate and further prepare for potential organized opposition to your district referendums. More resources are available at www.mnasa.org.

What's going on?

Examples of what the opposition can be like:

- ▶ Typically surfaces late in campaign, when response time is limited
- ▶ Attempts to overwhelm superintendent/staff with info requests:
 - ▶ Contracts with attorneys, financial advisors, construction managers, architects
 - ▶ Contracts with administrators; salary settlements
 - ▶ Audits and budgets
 - ▶ Enrollment projections
- ▶ Implies impropriety by district staff (received bribes, gifts)
- ▶ Becomes watchdog for inappropriate employee campaign activities
- ▶ Challenges use of school attorney – misuse of funds
- ▶ Opposition group uses a name that sounds supportive, and often plays off district logo
- ▶ Uses email for speed and ease of sharing
- ▶ Challenges data accuracy and hires own “experts”
- ▶ Disrupts election process:
 - ▶ Questions judges’ relationships to district
 - ▶ Non-homestead property owners show up at polls and get angry when they’re told they can’t vote
 - ▶ Examines and challenges absentee ballots
- ▶ Goes for “sticker shock” on total tax costs over entire life of the bond

- ▶ Attacks district's Achilles Heel (statutory operating debt, open enrollment issues, large retirement packages, poor test scores, unhappy residents due to consolidations)
- ▶ Bundles misinformation within accurate information—plants a “seed of doubt”
- ▶ Uses multiple pieces and phone calls to voters in last few days (automated calls, flyers on cars, last minute lies)
- ▶ Greatly increases “no” vote
- ▶ Can be anti-public schools—religious basis, home school bias
- ▶ Steals lawn signs
- ▶ Misuses mail/newspaper boxes

Districts that appear most likely to be targets of this type of opposition may have one or more of these characteristics:

- ▶ Bond election is part of the ballot request
- ▶ Rural or smaller town
- ▶ Significant agricultural property
- ▶ Consolidated district or declining enrollment
- ▶ One or more previous failed attempts
- ▶ History of conflict in district

What can districts do?

School districts are committed (both philosophically and legally) to providing the best education possible for their students. Often that requires needing additional resources—which is where bond and levy referendums come in. The following five rules offer guidance to assist districts with the type of organized opposition described earlier.

Rule #1

The best defense is a strong offense.

The most important thing in planning for a referendum is to be sure you have a solid community relations program in place long before your referendum campaign even begins.

- ▶ Do you regularly communicate with your community on all sorts of news—good and bad?
- ▶ Do you have a database of opinion leaders that you regularly meet with and share district information with?
- ▶ Do you have a number of ways (email, print, web, phone, face-to-face) that you communicate with your parents, voters, politicians, business leaders?
- ▶ Does your community feel like you listen to them and take their opinions seriously?
- ▶ Do you work diligently to build trust in your schools and rapport with your community?
- ▶ Does your staff feel like they are part of a well-respected district team?
- ▶ Does your staff know what your district’s core values and key messages are on various subjects, and do they use that information to be good ambassadors in your community?
- ▶ Does your local media trust you and use you as a ready resource on educational issues?
- ▶ Does your community feel part of the district decision-making process, and see that process as transparent and open?

If you are able to answer “yes” to most of these questions, you have a good start.

Rule #2

Be your own worst critic.

Look at your district and your referendum plan from all angles. If you were opposed to the referendum, where would you poke holes? Are there issues that have been simmering in your district (declining enrollment, upset residents about school closings, budget cuts, etc)? If so, how can you address them so they don't become easy targets for anger during a referendum? Identify both your district weaknesses and your referendum weaknesses and develop plans to either strengthen them or share key messages about them.

While a school district's job during a referendum is to provide information, referendums are inherently political because they involve voters and votes. Districts need to think like politicians as they share their information, and to ensure citizen groups have the information and structure they need to provide the advocacy. Prepare for negative attacks by thinking about them before they happen. When rumors strike, quickly identify their source and respond appropriately.

Rule #3

Provide advance warning.

Alert your community and your media that an organized opposition group that uses less-than-honest tactics might appear. Show some of the pieces that groups like these have used in other districts. Refer people to web pages of opposition groups, so they can see, first-hand, the kind of approach they use. (Examples can be found at www.mnasa.org.) Provide your media with connections to other districts that have been the targets of organized opposition, so the media can provide real-life stories about what it can be like. If appropriate, point out that the vocal detractors don't even live in your community, so they really have no place telling your voters what they should do for their schools and their students.

If you and your community know that organized opposition might appear—especially late in the campaign—you can prepare. Identify the methods you have available for quick communication, and have them ready. You can have last-minute fact sheets ready to distribute just before election day; citizen groups can have phone banks and phone trees ready for last minute calling; email lists can be activated within minutes if needed; schools can be prepared to use backpack distribution. Overall voter turnout tends to increase greatly when these types of organized opposition appear, so citizen groups need to increase their needed “yes” votes accordingly.

Rule #4

Have your facts straight.

Put together a fact book with all the info anyone might need on costs, enrollment and all the other types of data that people often ask about during referendums. Make it easily available to both district staff and citizen committees, so everyone has access to the same information and can quote from it as needed. When requests for data come in, this fact book will prove a handy resource and will also ensure everyone is using consistent and accurate information.

When opposition groups plant “seeds of doubt” wrapped in misinformation, it is imperative that the facts are quickly shared and readily accessible. If your facts are already compiled and readily available, many people will have the ability to correct wrong information quickly.

Rule #5

Keep your eyes on the prize.

If your district is inundated with data and information requests, it can take precious time away from both managing your school district and running your referendum information campaign. Assign someone in the district to be the point person on these requests, so the superintendent can remain in charge and not be constantly distracted. It is perfectly acceptable for your district to reply to a barrage of email requests using standard mail. This will help to slow down the requests, as well as limit how easily parts of your replies can be taken out of context and then quickly shared with others.

You may need to also designate someone as the responder. In some cases, it is not appropriate for the school district to respond, so it can be helpful if citizen leaders will take this on. Have plans for this ready in advance.

You cannot get overly distracted from your work. You have a lot of important factual information to share about what the referendum needs are based on, what it includes and what it will cost. Your plan should include key informational messages that you repeat over and over.

When you are under attack, it can be tempting to stoop to the level of the attackers. Don't. Stay on the high road and follow the rules. And never be afraid to step out and clearly and consistently state your own case. If your referendum is well-researched and based on the needs of your district, you have nothing to be ashamed of and everything to be proud of.

For more resources, opposition sample pieces, links
and other help in dealing with organized opposition,
go to the MASA web page at www.mnasa.org.



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