

Did you have an enthusiastic vote yes group working in your community?

Out of 36 responses, 22 had “vote yes” committees and 14 did not. Those who did have a “vote yes” group often credited them for the success of their referendum because of the energy they brought to the effort and the motivation they gave to voters. Notably, groups that were filled with “newbies” who weren’t burned out on past campaigns tended to be optimistic and successful.

The “vote yes” groups ranged in number from less than ten up to the hundreds. Some districts had difficulty recruiting participants for these groups. Others also lacked proper funds. Some had help from other administrators and the board, but lacked real community support. Many blamed lack of community support for a “vote yes” committee if there had been a recent big bond push or one was coming up in the near future.

The “vote yes” committees (or lack thereof) and their involvement varied *a lot*. Some responses indicated that the superintendent felt the entire community was the “vote yes” committee while others felt completely alone.

Were there visible and identifiable “vote no” persons active in your community?

Out of 36 responses, 29 did not have visible and identifiable “vote no” groups in their community and 7 did. Some were taken off guard when the referendum did not pass despite positive vibes from the community, a hard working “vote yes” committee, and no active “vote no” persons in the community.

Those that did have active “vote no” groups in their communities sometimes found them to be loud, intimidating and making use of troublesome tactics to get votes. Other “no” groups spread misinformation to voters. Because of the lack of credibility with some of these groups, some superintendents thought the “no” campaign might have helped the “yes” vote. Many of the “vote no” groups were anti-property tax and not necessarily anti-education funding.

What strategies worked well in getting the district’s message out to your public?

Some of the many strategies to get “yes” voters included mailings, literature drops, yard signs and signs targeting parents at student drop-off sites, calendars of events for the months before the vote, web sites and email messages, brochures, and inserts in event programs. Messages had a uniform design in print and web forms in order to aid in shaping a clear message.

Some districts made a list of cuts that would occur if the referendum failed, while others found that method to be too threatening. Despite fear of appearing threatening, remarks were made that these honest appeals worked. Many districts found technology to be an innovative way to reach community members while some rural districts found it to be ineffective if the community lacked proper access.

Utilizing community news resources was also a common strategy. Some local columnists got on board and wrote articles for the paper. Superintendents wrote letters to the editor or answered community questions in an “Ask the Superintendent” section. The importance of outweighing the amount of “vote no” editorials to emanate positive energy surrounding the “yes” campaign was duly noted. Superintendents were regulars on radio shows and local access television. Some districts chose to create professional taped interviews with the board and superintendent.

Meetings were very popular. Community meetings, however, were generally very poorly attended. Full audiences were found in meetings with businesses, clubs, church groups, and at senior citizen housing. Sometimes it took getting a hold of a few pivotal informal or formal community leaders that could serve as a driving force of common sense to get other voters to join in. Some superintendents chose to bring a tax expert to group meetings and community forums in order to better answer technical questions about the tax impact.

Phone banks were formed and staffed with “vote yes” group members, teachers, and board members. They called homes in the community and received calls to give out information, answer questions, identify yes and maybe voters, and remind people to get out and vote. Community surveys helped to generate interest and compile common questions. This helped identify the strengths of the campaign and the barriers in the community in order to frame the message appropriately. One creative district hosted a “walk for education” the weekend before the vote to create comradery and demonstrate support.

Superintendents understood that they needed to access their community in ways that addressed the individual needs of it. Often, going to the voters instead of having them come to the “yes” group was most effective. When superintendents reached out, community members gave a helping hand, and became the “vote yes” committees that the district may have been lacking.

Did the teachers’ union actively join the “vote yes” effort? Did the board members all actively support the referendum?

Out of 34 responses, 21 teachers’ unions and 25 boards were active, while 13 teacher’s unions and 9 boards were not active in joining the “vote yes” efforts.

The results were very scattered for board and teacher union involvement in aiding with the referendum. While some lucky districts had full support from both groups, many experienced mixed support from teachers and the board. Some union salary negotiation conflicts fueled the lack of participation among teachers. Others struggled with teacher participation because most of their teachers live outside of the district. Some unions supported the “vote yes” effort with varying financial contributions or volunteer time. Often, if political issues were afoot with the teachers and/or board members, support faltered from those entities.

What was an “ah-ha” learning moment for you in this campaign?

Some superintendents felt they had no “ah-ha” moment at all, but the vast majority had telling moments during the process of holding the referendum that will direct their actions in the future. Among the “ah-ha” moments were that the existence of a “no” committee is not a sign of failure and a good “yes” committee may be imperative to success, but not necessarily sufficient to get that victory.

The receptiveness of the community may vary greatly from year to year and referendum to referendum. Past referendum failures or successes are not the sole determinant of future success or failure. Being perceptive to the most acceptable and accessible modes of communication in different segments of the community is extremely important. Technology is becoming an increasingly large factor in these campaigns. It is important to know which modes of communication are best for all sectors of the community.

Many superintendents that reached out to and embraced the help of prominent groups (i.e.: senior citizen groups, ECFE parents) found them to be influential success. Making and keeping personal connections during times when the referendum is not on the radar could come in handy when the time comes to get the help necessary to pass a referendum.

What steps must your district now take in terms of program and staff cuts to stay financially viable?

Those that passed their referendums mostly will keep established programs and staff levels. Some are now able to restore funding to previous levels. The objective for these districts is to remain fiscally responsible and conservative, looking to gain efficiency wherever possible.

Those that did not have referendums pass have varying levels of cuts, from hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars for the next fiscal year. Many question the ability of their districts to make more cuts because they are already scrimping to keep basic programming in place. Many districts will resort to reducing bussing, cutting extra and co-curricular programs, increasing class sizes, freezing or reducing staff levels, and outsourcing support staff.

What emotional toll did this effort take on you and your family?

One of the top concerns superintendents have related to running a referendum is giving up family responsibilities to attend to the needs of the job. Being gone many nights per week, superintendents felt they had left their spouses to be temporary single parents to their children. Some superintendents who have been through more than one referendum keep their chin up knowing it is only one loss, while others would prefer to leave the profession because it has turned out to be a different job profile than what was initially expected. Some struggle with the time spent on the referendum that could have been spent with their families or on making positive differences for the education of children.

A few superintendents proclaimed the process did not faze them, though one superintendent contributed this common stolidity to being “calloused” by the unpredictability of the profession.

Though almost all referendums tend to be physically and mentally draining to the administrators that run them, the difference of emotional effects among superintendents based on the success or failure of a referendum were pretty vast. Superintendents felt good about their jobs and the district if the community was behind them in supporting education. Not surprisingly, those that did not have referendums pass were less optimistic about the synergy of the community and the future of the children in their district.

What else would you like to tell us?

The results are clear. There is an outcry to change the means by which schools are funded. The referendum process takes the district’s leaders off target of improving education. Administrators are forced to become a campaign organizer and professional beggar as opposed to focusing on what the job description supposes.

A couple of superintendents give remarks stating that “In Minnesota, if a child has the fortune of living in an affluent community, s/he will receive a comprehensive education with an abundance of opportunities for learning and participation” whereas less fortunate children are not provided with this wealth of opportunities. Essentially, the educational opportunities of our children “are defined by their zip code rather than by the fact that they are a resident of Minnesota”. If we believe all the children of Minnesota deserve a good education, we must provide all of them with equal opportunities.

It is a commonly held belief by administrators that the funding formula at the state level must change. Small or less prosperous towns are tearing themselves apart over this issue and community members may be in opposition to more property taxes, not education funding. Superintendents call upon the leaders of Minnesota to live up to the high standards in education that have preceded us and create a system that will fund an educational system that will be globally competitive and all inclusive for kids throughout the state.