The Levy Process and Your Constituents: Know the Issues

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School levies and bond issues have dramatically increased across the country. State funding formulas that limit inflationary growth in revenue, more mandates that require additional resources, and changes in tax laws all contribute to this growing phenomenon.

More and more, school boards are turning to their constituents for financial support through the levy process. School business officials and other education leaders are looking at a variety of approaches and techniques for increasing the likelihood of voters’ approving levies. One technique is to survey constituents to determine the issues foremost on their minds. Data collected through statistically accurate survey techniques can provide a wealth of information that can be critical when developing levy strategies and tactics that are more likely to garner a yes vote.

A school district’s attention to issues that are important to district residents can enhance the image of the school system. School district constituents with a positive image of the district are more likely to support tax issues than those residents who feel disenfranchised.

**Importance of Survey Data**

Public relations expert Steve Avakian suggested at a September 2005 meeting of the Dayton Area Superintendents Association that a fundamental element of all successful levies is accurate polling data and survey research. The information obtained through the polling process is critical when determining not only levy strategies and tactics but also the details of the levy itself.

In addition, Avakian suggested that the survey process is an excellent community engagement tool because it facilitates two-way communication between the school district and the community. The data gathered can let district officials know what the public thinks, is concerned about, and wants to see addressed. At the same time, a school district’s attention to those community-identified issues can engender the community’s positive feeling toward the district. Residents who have a positive view of the district are more likely to vote in favor of tax levies.

**Issues That Make a Difference**

Clearly the data that are gathered through the survey process are district specific; however, Avakian noted that several key issues seem to be on the public’s collective mind. If appropriately addressed by the district before the levy vote and throughout the campaign, those issues might contribute to a positive voter perception of the school district. Let’s look at each of these issues.

**Public interest in education.** Despite concerns about a variety of foreign and domestic issues, education remains a top public concern. Although some of that concern is negative, Avakian contends that apathy is worse than negativism. A public that is interested will at least pay attention, thus making the public engagement process easier.

**The economy.** Regardless of the district issues, some voters will vote no on a tax levy simply because of real or perceived economic concerns. Districts must recognize and address this concern when attempting a levy. One strategy is to leverage the public’s concern about education in general.

**Student safety.** The public wants to know that the schools are safe and that safety is maintained through effective policies, procedures, and sufficient personnel. A district’s attention to this issue can pay huge dividends in terms of public perception. Parents who believe that their children are safe and being cared for are more likely to support the levy.

**Technology training for teachers.** Although schools are increasingly becoming “wired,” there is public concern that the teaching staff doesn’t know how to use technol-
ogy effectively for instruction. District attention to this issue is important for voter perception. For example, sharing that an operating levy will allow increased staff development in the area of technology can convince some residents to vote yes.

Discovering the issues of concern to this group through polling and market survey could be the difference between levy success and failure.

School district test results. Continued attention to school improvement activities that lead to better test results and enhanced educational opportunities for students is essential. For example, most parents believe that smaller class sizes can improve educational opportunities for students. Therefore, a levy strategy that emphasizes smaller class sizes because of increased funding usually resonates well with voters.

Involvement of the building principal. For most parents, the individual school building, not the central office, is the focus of attention. Parents tend to trust principals and feel comfortable with them. Principal involvement in the public engagement process surrounding the proposed levy is critical to its success.

Strategies to involve nonparents. Avakian noted that school districts do a reasonably good job of keeping parents informed; however, that is not always the case with nonparents, especially empty nesters. Remember that in the average school district, approximately 70% of levy voters are nonparents. This population will surely grow as the baby boomers continue to age. Consequently, strategies that inform and involve this segment of the populace are critical to success.

Discovering the issues of concern to this group through polling and market survey could be the difference between levy success and failure. Examples of typical concerns for this group include market value of their property and workforce development. Levy tactics that explain how a yes vote can help the school work toward improvement in these areas may well enhance the chances of success for a levy.

Conclusion
This list of issues is not all-inclusive, and certainly the specific context of any school district will vary. For that very reason, it is essential for school districts to engage in the collection of data from their constituents.

School administrators, school business officials, and other education leaders would be wise to consider using survey research as they engage the public and develop levy strategies and tactics. Awareness of the issues and action planning to deal with the issues that are identified can enhance public perception of the school. Positive public perception increases the chances for success at the ballot box.

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