

Planning Your Referendum

Like in sports, timing is critical to referendum success

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Planning for a referendum is kind of like training for the Olympics — those most successful often prepare for years before their big moment in the spotlight. Ultimately the difference between a gold or silver medal (or a touchdown pass from Aaron Rogers to Donald Driver!) is timing.

While for athletes victory might be measured in tenths of a second, success at the polls requires a deliberate and well-planned effort that typically requires many months, if not years, of careful preparation.

■ Be Realistic

It starts with being realistic about how much time it takes to work through the stages of referendum development and how effectively your school board can work together.

You must begin by clearly identifying, understanding, and prioritizing your needs. Whether your district is facing an operating deficit, facilities issues or both, the board must collaborate to assess potential solutions to address them.

In some districts, individual members with strong political opinions make coming to consensus a challenging task. The majority of

boards need to add special board meetings to their calendars and commit extra time on meeting agendas to referendum planning and discussion.

■ Make Time for Community Dialogue

Most successful referenda efforts incorporate community engagement into their planning. True dialogue with district residents takes time and offering public comment periods during regular board meetings really doesn't count. Some of the most effective methods for listening to your community include online and paper surveys, hosting special community workshops, and offering informal one-on-one sessions with your district administrator or board members. These activities must be carefully timed around the school calendar

(the fall is a great time for community dialogue!) and holidays to attract as much public participation as possible.

You must also leave room in your planning schedule for thoughtful review and consideration of the feedback provided by residents. If the community perceives decisions have already been made and the outreach effort is less than sincere, your long-term credibility could be seriously damaged.

■ Evaluate Election Opportunities

Referendum timing is also driven by the state-wide election cycle; not every year provides the same voting opportunities. In even-numbered years (like 2012), districts can present referenda questions on the two regularly scheduled General Election dates held in April or November. If a race is contested and a primary is required, two additional Primary Elections will also be scheduled for February or August.

In odd-numbered years (like 2013), districts only have the winter/spring voting dates (February and April) available as regularly scheduled elections. General Fall Elections are not held in odd years.

So, why does this matter? While it's true that school districts can essen-



tially schedule a special election nearly any time of any year, 100 percent of the costs associated with an election are the district's responsibility if your resolutions are the only items on the ballot. Costs include preparing and printing the ballots, all legal notices and official publications, programming the machines, and the cost of staffing the polls at all times with a minimum of three workers per polling place. Depending on the size of your district, the financial implication of a special election could be significant.

Yet possibly more important than assessing the cost of a special election is the need to carefully evaluate how your community will react to one. Referenda success is driven by public perception. Unfortunately, special elections are often perceived negatively as an attempt to "slip one by voters" during an off election-cycle. Your district may have incredibly valid reasons for going to special election and this rationale

needs to be clearly communicated to all voters as soon as possible.

■ Effective Communications

When it comes to passing a referendum, effective and clear communication is critical right up to the vote date.

However, the mistake so many districts make is avoiding communication — except during a referendum campaign. Residents become deeply resentful when they never hear a word from the district in between requests for more tax dollars. Keeping residents informed of district issues, celebrating success stories, and soliciting feedback on a regular, ongoing basis throughout the year helps establish the strong foundation of awareness that you ultimately need to be successful during your next referendum initiative. This is particularly important when times are tough because the community must feel confident that their investment in local

schools will pay off in the future.

■ Work Backwards to Get to Your Goal

Just like athletes focus on breaking world or Olympic records, you need to identify a preliminary referendum date to target your planning efforts.

Using the major activities and benchmarks outlined earlier, work backward from a "target referendum" date to establish your planning timeline. The more complex your potential referendum (*i.e.*, those involving closing or building new schools, redistricting, or changing grade levels) the more time you will likely need for the process.

Remember, it is never too early to start discussing your needs and planning your next referendum. Just like in sports, timing is everything. ■

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