



Successful Referendums Start with **Communication**

School leaders describe how communication efforts helped pass their referendums

Shelby Anderson

Declines in state aid, caps on taxes, and falling revenues are making school referendums a common reality for school districts. This article examines three school districts' successful referendums held this spring. A common theme among the school districts' successful referendum efforts was an emphasis on community engagement and education.

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF FORT ATKINSON *Referendum education in action*

After extensive community engagement work, the School District of Fort Atkinson passed a \$5.25 million operational referendum to exceed its revenue cap by \$1.75 million for three school years.

But, before coming up with these numbers, the district did its best to gauge the community and get an idea of what it would support. Before selecting and announcing the referendum, a Financial Advisory Committee, made up of area CEOs and finance industry professionals, was formed. It crunched numbers and came up with solutions to the district's finances.

Recommendations from the Financial Advisory Committee were

passed onto the Community Advisory Committee, which was made up of a diverse group of community members. This group narrowed the district's referendum options down to two recommendations. Before selecting one of the options, the school district presented them to the community and encouraged feedback on the referendums via a community survey. The district received 700 responses. Based on the responses and other data, the board selected a recommendation and began the process of educating the community about the referendum.

When it began reaching out to the community, the district recognized that it needed to reach a diverse audience. District leaders knew that different groups of people prefer to get information in different formats. With that in mind, the district presented information about the referendum at government meetings, they went to businesses and talked to area employees during their lunch breaks, and they handed out pamphlets outside a local grocery store. In addition, the

district produced informational videos and launched a website devoted to providing information and resources related to the referendum.

"You're trying to reach all different groups of people through different means," said Jeff Zaspel, superintendent of the School District of Fort Atkinson.

Most impressively, the district did all of this without the help of an outside consultant. Instead, the district worked through its Community Advisory Board, school board, administrators, and volunteers. In addition, a parent group stepped up and assisted the district.





Kettle Moraine Board Member Terri Phillips (right) talks with community members during a community workshop addressing the district's referendum.

With all of the help the district received, Zaspel said one thing that helped keep the communication efforts focused was that the district selected core messages that were used across all communication formats — web, email, print, etc. This kept the messaging focused and straight-forward.

Bob Chady, president of the Fort Atkinson School Board, said one reason the referendum passed was because of the work the district had done with its last three referendums. Each time, the district engaged the community and built trust.

“I think our success is due to the fact that we’ve been successful the last three times,” Chady said. “This community sees it [referendum] every four or five years and I think they value education in our community.”

When the district was educating the community about its latest referendum, Zaspel was a first-year superintendent. He admitted that he was not a referendum expert but he said he learned that one of the most important things is to know your community.

“You have to have a real feel of your community,” Zaspel said. “It’s really about listening to people.”

On a final note, Chady said the date of the election needs to be checked against the school district calendar. In Fort Atkinson, the school calendar that was sent to the

board for approval had spring break occurring during the week of the election. The school board changed spring break week to another week. Having spring break occur during the election could have drawn away potential voters as families may have been on vacation.

“You want to make sure your parents will be there to support you on election day,” Chady said.

KETTLE MORAINE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Developing staff as referendum advocates

Like many school districts in Wisconsin, since the inception of revenue limits, the Kettle Moraine School District has operated below the state average for per-pupil revenue. However, a district can’t operate very long this way without making substantial cuts or going to referendum.

The school district had two year’s worth of survey data that indicated there was support to address the district’s needs regarding capital maintenance projects, technology infrastructure, safety and security, and updated learning spaces.

The district announced a \$49.6 million capitol maintenance referendum and got to work reaching out to its communities. The Kettle Moraine School District serves 10

communities in southeastern Wisconsin. Connecting with such a diverse group of stakeholders was a challenge. With help from advisors at architecture and construction management firms, the district developed a comprehensive communications plan.

“We felt it was extremely important to make every effort to reach into each of the communities as well as to reach out to our parents and staff,” said Pat Deklotz, superintendent of the Kettle Moraine School District.

The communications plan involved going to the meetings of every municipality included in the Kettle Moraine School District. Press releases and articles were sent out to local newspapers. The district held tours of the district’s facilities, it hosted informational nights, and used the district newsletter and website to communicate about the referendum. The district’s social media accounts were used and the district made four videos. Information was also available at a variety of district activities, including parent/teacher conference, sporting events, and evening activities.

The district found, through its survey data, that its community members primarily received information about their schools through each other.

“That made it paramount that everyone interested in or affiliated with our schools be equipped with

Referendum Sessions at Convention

The 94th State Education Convention, Jan. 21-23, Milwaukee, will feature several sessions on holding a successful referendum, including sessions led by school districts featured in this article.

We Did it and You Can Too — A Success Building Referendum
Wed., Jan. 21, 8-9 am, 201CD
Prescott School District

Referendum Success Through Community Engagement
Thurs., Jan. 22, 10:45-11:45 am, 201B
School District of Fort Atkinson

Communication and Engagement Strategies for Facility Referenda
Thurs., Jan. 22, 1:45-2:45 pm, 201A
Kettle Moraine School District

Passing a Referendum
Fri., Jan. 23, 8-9 am, Wright C (Hilton)
Parkview School District

information,” Deklotz said. “We needed those individuals to be spokespeople, able to share information and help anyone who might ask them a question.”

District leaders met with parent and community organizations, and spoke multiple times with staff at each

building of the schools, the district office, as well as with special groups such as food service and custodians.

“The most effective communication method was word-of-mouth conversations held by our staff and community members,” Deklotz said.

Looking back on the process, Deklotz said the district learned a lot. While face-to-face conversations were important to a lot of community members, social media had also become a credible and effective means of communication. Deklotz said she learned that video was more powerful than print and that often less is more.

“We learned to keep the message simple and to provide multiple opportunities for individuals to dig as deep into a particular question or interest as they desire,” she said. “There were no questions left unanswered.”

PARKVIEW SCHOOL DISTRICT

Reflecting the needs of the community

After a failed referendum in 2012, the Parkview School District put two referendums before its voters this year. One was a \$17 million facility referendum to enable the district to consolidate its buildings and renovate its elementary school and junior/senior high school.

The second referendum was an operational referendum to exceed the revenue limit by \$350,000 over the course of three school years.

The district had put similar referendums to its voters in the past with no success. However, this year, both referendums passed.

“The referendum that failed in 2012 was for a much smaller amount of money, but because it didn’t reflect the needs of our community and a clear message did not reach all stakeholders, we were unsuccessful,” said District Administrator Steve Lutzke. “The April 2014 referendum was conceived by the community and was clearly articulated and, as a result, we were successful.”

Input from the community guided the referendum proposals throughout the process. Before any proposals were sent to the school board, the district held several listening sessions. The district reviewed data from the district and input from the listening sessions to develop and refine the referendum proposals through its long-range planning committee, which included members of the community.

The long-range planning committee hired a consultant to help the district get a better picture of its future needs. School Board President Clay Hammes said the consultant also helped bring transparency to the process.

“Utilizing a third-party group helped quell any accusations that the committee, or any individual committee member, was pursuing an agenda that may not have been in the best interest of the district,” he said.

With several referendum options on the table, a final round of listening sessions were held before the school board approved the referendums.

“The administration and board listened to the needs of the community,” Lutzke said. “This may sound easy, but it required us to leave our preconceived ideas at the door and really listen to what the community would support.”

The district learned that what the community would support was

Inspired by Innovation

We are committed to taking a unique approach to guiding you through your legal issues.



DAVIS | KUELTHAU
attorneys at law

BROOKFIELD | GREEN BAY | MADISON | MILWAUKEE | OSHKOSH
www.dkattorneys.com



a non-recurring referendum for \$350,000 over three years. Looking at the numbers, the district actually needed \$750,000 each school year to continue operating as it had in the past. The district will have to make some cuts but will still be able to maintain a high-level of education.

The big sell was the district's \$17 million building referendum to update the district's elementary school and junior/senior high school. Lutzke said community members supported this large price tag once they learned what it would mean for the community and just how badly it was needed. Both of the district's school buildings are at least 50 years old and in need of renovations and updates.

"The referendum must clearly identify how the investment will make learning better for kids," he said. "Parkview successfully delivered this message to the voters."

Hammes said, from his perspective, the district was able to pass its referendums because it established credibility with the community.

"You have to put in the time to develop the best plan possible that is in the best interest of the district as a whole," Hammes said. "Credibility is paramount. The public has to believe what you're telling them or you will fail."

Lutzke said he is grateful that his community approved the referendums and he feels a responsibility to use that support to the best of the district's ability.

"I know that all of the district personnel feel an immense obligation to use the financial resources provided by the community to improve the quality of education for our students," he said. ■

Referendum Communication TIPS

- Develop clear, consistent messages to be used across all formats of referendum communications (web, print, video, etc.).
- Effective video messages can be more powerful than print.
- Social media is an effective and credible communication tool, make sure it is part of your communications plan.
- Your district's own staff can be powerful advocates for your district's referendum. Meet with them and give them the tools and knowledge so they can educate people in the community.

For more information, visit the WASB Referendum Resource Center at wasb.org. Select "Communications" and then "Referendum Resource Center."

Making the grade

HORTONVILLE SCHOOL DISTRICT

"The personal commitment on behalf of the Miron team was outstanding and evident in the three construction projects occurring at the same time in the district. The team was in constant communication with our staff, and understood the needs and priorities for getting the schools ready to welcome our students in the fall. Our students will enjoy these beautiful facilities for years to come, and Miron Construction guided us every step of the way."

Dr. Heidi Schmidt
District Administrator,
Hortonville Area School District



Building Excellence

An equal opportunity, affirmative action employer.

MIRON-CONSTRUCTION.COM

