How school district voter surveys can help develop ballot and bond proposals… and persuade voters to approve them

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EPIC-MRA
has worked with nearly 150 public school districts and Michigan's ISD/RESAs for over three decades

EPIC-MRA's work experience in education includes:

Bond Proposals

Sinking Funds

Headlee Overrides

Non-Homestead Renewals

Special Education

Career Training

Regional Enhancement Millages

Survey research can…

❑ **Assist in the development of bond proposals by shedding light on:**

- What improvements district voters support (or oppose)

- What level of taxation voters will support (or oppose)

❑ **Inform districts why a bond proposal may have failed in a past elections**

❑ **Help districts develop messages:**

- To inform voters of the need for your proposal

- To help rebut the messages of your opposition

Types of surveys commissioned

Live Interviewer Telephone Surveys

- Most frequently used
- Most statistically reliable, accurate, and predictive
- Allows the inclusion of cell phone respondents
- Able to be pre-stratified (by gender, civil division, etc.)
- Less "self-selective"
- Faster turn-around time

Types of surveys commissioned

Online Surveys

- Perfect for parent, teacher, support staff surveys
- Effective for specific issue and/or broad inquiry
- Potential for increased sample size
- Reduced cost

Types of surveys commissioned

Automated Surveys (ROBO Calls)

- **Designed for short questionnaires on specific topics**
- **Potential for increased sample size**
- **Reduced cost**

Types of surveys commissioned

Direct Mail

- Effective for specific issue and/or broad inquiry
- Able to reach a larger audience and engage "everyone"
- Visual presentation of materials
- Allows respondent more time to read/digest information

Don't Find Out The "Hard Way" At the Polls

K-12 Schools Districts and ISD/RESAs can measure, in advance, how the following <u>may</u> impact a ballot proposal's reception:

- **District Image**
- **Voter attitudes toward spending/fiscal responsibility**
- **Level of support for bond/ballot proposals**
- **Resistance to any cuts in services/programs**

Information Provided by Surveys:

- Support for ballot proposals with little info except description, tax increase amount, repayment period, money raised and tax impact

- Support for ballot proposals with more detailed information provided about specific improvements and/or purchases made with funding from proposal

- Relative support for each planned improvement component

- The most advantageous election date

- The greatest amount of tax increase voters will support

- The best spokesperson(s) for informational campaign

- The best/most used sources of information that inform voters about their local schools

"Atmospheric" Influences

- Has education quality improved, gotten worse or stayed about the same in recent years?

- What "letter grade" does the district, superintendent, principals, teachers, school board, and support staff earn from voters?

- Are school taxes considered too high, too low, or about right?

- How do voters view the quality of school buildings and facilities?

- Has there been student population growth/decline; and are voters aware of it?

- Are repair/restoration needs generally recognized and understood?

- What are the biggest problems in the schools that must be addressed?

- How are schools-of-choice and/or other policies viewed?

- Are there other local millage requests (911 service/police/fire) competing for approval in the same election?

Surveys can reveal issues that make voter approval of ballot proposals more difficult, and offer the district the opportunity to "get out in front" of them

- If a solid majority of voters think existing buildings are in great condition, they may be unlikely to support higher taxes to finance upgrades

- If a large number of voters think taxes are already too high (above 40%), passage of an increase can be problematic

- Long-term residents, and seniors in general, may resent the cost new families have caused (streets, schools, other services), and could be hard to win over for improvements

- Competing ballot proposals for tax increases (e.g. public safety) might be more attractive to voters than an increase in school taxes

- If the superintendent, school principals and the administration earns more C, D & F "grades" than A & B "grades", they would probably not be good spokespersons for an info campaign

Salience of Messages for a "Yes Committee"

- There are a variety of pro/con messages that can influence voters

- After testing support for improvements and a proposed tax increase, messages can be tested both for AND against the proposal

- Positive messages that have been effective include:

  - Access to classroom technology that improves learning;

  - Workplace technology that better prepares students for future high-tech jobs or a college education

- Negative messages that have been effective include:

  - An economy that had not fully recovered and an uncertain job future

  - General opposition to a tax increases for <u>any</u> purpose

- All questions can be analyzed by segment - demographics such as:

  - Parents vs. non-parents

  - Age, gender, educational level, income, political party identification, geographical area, years living in area

  - History of voting in school or other types of elections

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Some examples of important things that school districts have learned from district surveys

- Several board members doubted the community would support a 1.5 mill building and site fund for Lansing Schools, but a preliminary survey showed solid support by over 60 percent - which was the end result

- When Ovid/Elsie Schools merged years ago and tore down two junior high schools, that action influenced voters a *generation later* to oppose a new junior high

- Voters in Pinckney Schools did not oppose a school bond proposal because of high turnout for a recall election as suspected, but rather because they supported other competing millage proposals

- When East Lansing Schools defeated a bond proposal in 2012, many voters thought it was because Red Cedar School would be closed. The loss was more due to its placement on a presidential primary election.

- When voters in Dexter Schools were told a $60 million bond proposal could be reduced, rolled into other debt and extended without a tax increase, support increased from 53 to 68 percent.

The Charlotte Schools Experience

- After three proposals failed, a survey showed why voters were opposed, and what they may support as bond components. Voters opposed such things as a pool, auditorium, athletic complex, and narrowly favored a new middle school

- Voter support for a new middle school later increased, but only after voters learned of serious problems with the junior high that would be replaced

- In *a later* election, voters ended up supporting an auditorium, pool, athletic complex and other upgrades - when presented in multiple ballot proposals with persuasive messaging for each

- Effective use of targeted database information helped Charlotte Schools maximize support for improvements - even *above* the levels shown in polling

Database development and use can be just as important as survey research

Customized voter databases can help districts overcome limited support, as well as used in targeted Get Out The Vote efforts

An EPIC-MRA voter database:

- **Merges the regularly updated State of Michigan qualified voter file with lists of parents, school employees; and even sub-files such as band or athletic boosters**

- **Enables districts to effectively communicate with key constituencies based on gender, age, or geography**

- **Includes other data such as postal discount codes, AV voter status, and partisan affiliation**

- **Identifies registered voters and describes an individual's likelihood of voting based on vote history – and identifies who is NOT registered to vote**

- **Helps facilitate voter registration, and ID programs conducted to identify and mobilize "YES" voters initiated by a YES Committee**

A Yes Committee can purchase database products to communicate with voters about a bond/millage proposal

- **Mailing labels**

- **Walking cards for door knocking activities; whether for all voters or those without phones**

- **Mailing lists, phone lists, and/or combined lists for an integrated phone ID and mailing program**

- **GOTV lists**

   The database can also be used to generate a telephone list for

   your ROBO or live calling efforts

- **Communicate messages to urge undecided voters to vote Yes**

- **GOTV reminder calls leading up to the election**

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