

**Challenges In Texas Bond Elections: How Politricks Can Influence Outcomes**

Chris Calvin, Ph.D.  
Northcentral University

Nancy Henschel, M.S.  
Educational Specialist/Community Activist

Kevin Tunstall  
Political Consultant

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## **Abstract**

This position piece draws from experiences garnered during a case study near Houston, TX using the collaborative action research methodology (Sagor, 2000). In a fairly large Texas school district (63,000 school age students), carrying significant debt, some of the ethical and political issues come to ahead. Suggestions to address the crisis are offered in summation.

## **Introduction**

For years aficionados of organizational praxis have followed and attempted to decode structures and processes that have lead to fairly complex outcomes in local school bond elections. Often, and with a great deal of success, school debt is advanced without much query from insiders or those in the media and general public. This case study, spanning a 3 year cycle, examined the systems, processes and structures, put in place, that now seem common fare in most larger districts. In Texas, traditionally over 80% of most school related bond elections have enjoyed support by the voters and taxpayers. Frequently this approval occurs without asking the critical over-site questions such as, can we afford personnel in the classrooms/buildings being proposed for construction or will we be able to reduce the long-term debt associated with such endeavors, as well as the all important one regarding the impact such an effort can have on the near and long view of the operational budget via the debt service portion. Very little along the line of transformation in this arena will be accomplished without addressing these salient points.

## **Background**

During the mid 2000's several highly publicized articles and news media reports went out regarding a very well connected company doing its business in several large Texas school districts (Express News, 2010; 2015). In one of these districts, near San Antonio, the bond process had apparently been surrendered to one of the corporations that regularly benefitted in

this closed loop process, from these multi-billion dollar long-term governmental debt packages. In the early stories, superintendents, often selected for service by the same boards, had surrendered their fiduciary responsibilities and perhaps the thin line of protections and over-site built into an already questionable very public financial structure. At several stages, accusations were made that an entire board had accepted gifts, including expensive golfing junkets to California, in exchange for their abandonment of the process to these government contractors (WOIA news report, 2009). The justice department and FBI were brought into investigate in this case. The ripple effect could be felt across the state impacting not only bond elections, but school district board races. Our district was no different. During the initial 2 year study phase, these reports became fodder and played a role in several school board races and subsequent selection of its "reform" superintendent. Interestingly enough it was observed, that some of the same local groups that helped bring these events to the forefront were subsequently infiltrated by hired local marketing organizations to help reshape the public perception of the events and return the district to "business as usual". In the seventh largest school district in the state, the average time between bond referendums went from 3 years to over 7 while carrying over 1.5 billion from prior campaigns. Whether this was a result of the "abuse" of the process has yet to be determined, but a need for closer supervision and a local board and policy shift lead to greater over-site for the short-term.

### **Special Issues**

For what is believed to have been a first in local history, community activist in a Texas school district relied heavily on internet modalities to communicate, along with the public forums that had been made available to them. From blogging in general, to the formation of a social

networking site, garnering close to 2000 page views per day at the height of the controversy, instantaneous contact became the norm and limited response efforts, by the district, helped place the districts communications office and superintendent on the defensive. In a local news report, it was actually stated, that it became the "facebook problem" as purportedly quoted by school district sources. Following one of a series of Texas Public Information Act (TPIA) requests, the district actually refused to comply with a state order to produce the records (Tunstall, Henschel, Personal communications, 2010, 2011.). This lack of compliance was subject to close public and media scrutiny almost immediately with the news agencies reporting almost word for word from the blogs and social networking site. At one point it reached a fever pitch when several complaints by the public were filed with the state attorney general, now the current governor of Texas. Orders were issued that the district was to turn over the requested records, but even following this, compliance wasn't forthcoming. According to one filer, they were supposedly informed by the state office "...that if the district refused to comply with the order there wasn't much they could do... ". (Houston Chronicle/FortBendNow, 2008).

Although this resolution was, and is, unacceptable, not much has changed to improve the oversight in this state. Without closer monitoring by public watchdogs and agencies, independent of the process, not much can progress along these lines. In this district, a newly elected school board did change one related policy regarding how bond funding was spent in an attempt to improve tracking, but that body was over-turned in the next two election cycles leaving a ticking time-bomb for future boards, administrations and the public.

## **Summary**

In the final analysis it will be up to local watchdogs, administrators and community members to over-see this vulnerable process. Stacking pre-bond exploratory committees with government vendors to steer the obvious outcomes will have to be abandoned along with the establishment of stronger ethics guidelines that have real consequences via the force of law when the public trust is in question (Calvin, 2004). District communications offices and the superintendents will need to be forthright about expenditures and the protections in place with their constituents. Legislatures will need to become more involved in taking action when issues like non-compliance occur or abuses take place like the ones mentioned above. The question becomes do the law makers have the political fortitude to stand up to potential contributors in this somewhat closed “pay-to-play” financial process? Additionally, further quantitative and qualitative studies are needed using Collaborative Action Research (CAR), Grounded Theory, Naturalistic Inquiry (NI) methods or further case study to expose the underlying issues to this process challenge... Time will tell...

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