School Bond Success: An Exploratory Case Study

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Following two-failed school bond issues in 1995 and 1998, one mid-sized rural school district organized an effort that led to two successful school bond elections in 2001 and 2003. The school district's strategic plan mirrored many of the recommendations for successful bond referendums published in School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools. Findings from this case study, utilizing a Rapid Assessment Process, illustrate many of the reasons why the school district passed two consecutive bond issues with unprecedented community support. Although the findings from this school district may not match the concerns of all communities, it provides readers with a perspective of voters' beliefs in one rural school district.

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceived most influential factors that led to two successful school bond referendums in one rural mid-size school district. Factors considered were recommendations from the book, *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools* (Boschee & Holt, 1999).

Introduction and Literature Review

A significant challenge facing rural school leaders across the United States is the problem of aging school buildings, and for many rural districts a school enrollment that is stagnant or declining. The conclusions and recommendations contained in this exploratory case study should provide rural school leaders with voter input from one rural school district's successful effort to overcome this daunting facility problem.

Research indicates that half of U.S. schools have unsatisfactory environmental conditions, including a lack of appropriate acoustics for noise control, poor ventilation, and inadequate physical security (Holloway, 2000). Further, a study in 2000 by the National Education Association estimated that "$268 billion is needed to bring the nation's schools up to acceptable standards for basic issues such as plumbing, roof integrity, lighting and safety" (McLaughlin & Bavin, 2003, p. 28).

A strong determining factor in the condition of a school is the age of the facility. In 1999, the most recent survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education found the average age of public school buildings was forty years and on the average major renovations had occurred over eleven years ago. The average functional age of school buildings in America was sixteen years with 40 percent having a functional age of over fifteen years (Lewis, Snow, Farris, Smerdon, Cronen, Kaplan & Greene, 2000).

As would be expected, older schools are in most need of repair, and yet in many cases, they exist in school districts that do not have the funding ability to maintain these buildings (Lewis, et al., 2000). In communities of all sizes where the majority of students are from low-income households, school districts have fewer dollars for preventive maintenance of facilities. Holloway (2000) found that in urban school districts, "about 3.5 percent of the budget is typically spent on facilities maintenance. Of this amount, however, 85 percent is budgeted for emergency repairs, with only a small amount remaining for preventive maintenance" (p. 88).

Some believe that the funding solution for school facilities and other public infrastructures will most likely be determined at the national level rather than the local level. However, Congress has done little to solve the nation's problem of deteriorating school facilities. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) provides for state educational agencies to apply for federal funds to be utilized in local school districts. *Section 5582, Subpart 18: Healthy, High-Performance Schools*, offers subgrants to be used "(1) to develop a comprehensive energy audit of the energy consumption characteristics of a building and the need for additional energy conservation…, (2) to produce a comprehensive analysis of building strategies, designs, materials, and equipment that (a) are cost effective, produce greater energy efficiency, and enhance indoor air quality; and (b) can be used when conducting school construction and renovation or purchasing materials and equipment, (3) to obtain research and provide technical services and assistance in planning and designing healthy, high-performance school buildings, including developing a timeline for implementation of such plans" (NCLB, 2001).

Healthy, high-performing school buildings are defined as school buildings in which the design, construction,

operation, and maintenance (1) use energy-efficient and affordable practices and materials, (2) are cost-effective, (3) enhance indoor air quality, and (4) protect and conserve water. Although these recent federal dollars offer school districts opportunities to begin the conversations needed to pursue new and upgraded school buildings, none of these federal funds may be used for "construction, renovation, or repair of school facilities" (NCLB, 2001).

Others believe that the solution lies in new forms of support at the state and local levels. From their article, McLaughlin and Bavin (2003) referenced a study by the Association of School Business Officials (ASBO) which provided in a 1999 report, a disapproval of general obligation bonding and equalized funding in reference to adequacy resulting in postponed maintenance. Emphasizing newer educational funding strategies, ASBO presented recommendations, including "changing state and federal laws to allow the capital markets to receive a tax-exempt return for investments made in the renovation and construction of school facilities" (p. 28).

Whenever educators, politicians, or public school patrons speak about public school facilities, the discussion usually centers on new construction. However, a report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicated that three of every four existing public school buildings are in need of repair (Richard, 2000).

Clearly, rural administrators and boards of education face many dilemmas in terms of their school districts' physical plants. Many do not have the necessary money available from their general or capital outlay funds to solve their building problems. Additionally, they often face attitudes within their communities that become barriers to taking action. A lack of adequate funding of education from property taxes has resulted in the delayed maintenance and repair of some buildings and the delayed replacement of aging facilities in many school districts.

In addition to negative feelings about higher taxes, other issues that intensify bond elections include the community's feelings following prior attempts at passing school bond referendums, trust in the board of education and school leadership, and the impact of the school district's bond election campaign to win the support of its community.

Facing all of these identified facility challenges, the rural school district in this exploratory case study, developed a successful marketing plan that provides significant information for rural school leaders. The school district launched a new unified campaign that utilized recommendations for successful bond referendums found in *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools* (Boschee & Holt, 1999). The district selected this particular book to guide its campaign because of its positive reviews and one of the assistant superintendent's knowledge of the book's contents and relevancy to the school district's goals and needs.

Utilizing the recommendations found in *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools* (Boschee & Holt, 1999), the school district moved from the two failed attempts, to a 62 percent approval in 2001 and a 78 percent approval in 2003. The connection between the recommendations for successful bond referendums and the community campaigns in 2001 and 2003 warrants this research.

Methodology

The methodology in this case study included a research question, overview of the school district, procedures utilized and data analysis. Additionally, Table 1 outlining the recommended activities in *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools* (Boschee & Holt, 1999), is incorporated in this section.

Research Question

What recommendations from *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools* (Boschee & Holt, 1999) are viewed as the most influential to the two successful bond referendums in 2001 and 2003?

The School District

The school district selected for the study serves a community of 20,000 patrons and 2,600 students. The school district operates five facilities: three elementary schools, a middle school and a high school. The elementary and middle school facilities were all over fifty years old. Although built to occupy secondary students, a former secondary school facility was being utilized as an elementary building housing over 600 students. None of the buildings were equipped to meet the needs of all students and staff. The community, although historically supportive of public schools, had failed to support two bond elections in 1995 and 1998 to build new and upgrade existing facilities. The school district was selected based on this criteria: (a) the school district had deteriorating facilities, specifically three K-5 facilities and one 6-8 facility averaging over 70 years of age, (b) the school district's K-5 and 6-8 facilities lacked appropriate handicap accessibility, elevators, modern heating/cooling equipment, and adequate classroom space to meet the needs of a 21st century education, and (c) the school district had experienced two failed bond issues in 1995 and 1998. This situation clearly reflects the concerns expressed in cited research presented earlier. The deteriorating facilities in this school district lacked adequate heating and cooling equipment, appropriate handicap accessibility, elevators, sufficient lighting, and acceptable classroom space for teaching and learning. Due to the condition of the school facilities, two failed school bond elections, followed by two successful bond elections, the school district emerged as an ideal case study for the researchers to consider the influences that resulted in the two recent successful bond elections.

Procedure

Data for the study were collected from a sample of registered school district voters (N=140). The participants represented members of the school district's board of education (N=5), administration (N=6), faculty (N=35), staff (N=14), parents (N=47), and patrons that had worked to build community support during the district's two successful bond issue campaigns (N=33). Eleven activities (Boschee & Holt, 1999), for passing school bond elections were presented to all 140 participants to consider and rank which recommendations were most influential in passing both school bond elections. These were:

- The superintendent should ensure a unanimous vote of support by the board of the board of education.
- Administrators and board members should keep as low a profile as possible.
- The board and administrators should establish a diverse community task force or facilities committee.
- The attention of the campaigners should be on "yes" voters. Proponents should concentrate on getting "yes" voters to the polls and convincing the undecided to vote "yes," rather than trying to change the minds of "no" voters.
- The local media and school staff member should be involved in the early planning stages of the campaign.
- School boards should utilize experts such as bond consultants, architects, and other trained individuals to educate support groups in the community.
- The citizens' committee should concentrate a great deal of effort on disseminating information through flyers, brochures, question-and-answer sheets, and other printed material.
- District should collaborate with other governmental agencies.
- The school board should limit the tax levy increase by keeping the school design simple and by utilizing existing capital outlay funds.
- Disseminated information and public relations activities should focus on the benefits to children and the community.
- School boards and administrators should seek advice from administrators and school boards that have won bond elections. (Boschee & Holt, 1999)

The Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) was used to collect the data. According to Beebe (2001), RAP is a process used to construct a team of "at least two individuals to quickly gain sufficient understanding of a situation to make preliminary decisions for the design and implementation of applied activities or additional research" (p. 1). RAP is defined by the "basic concepts of triangulation and iterative analysis, and additional data collection and not by the use of specific research techniques" (p. 7). The results can be gained in as few as four days, yet allow the researchers the opportunity to gain adequate understanding of a circumstance to make initial decisions. Specific conditions, such as when further investigation is warranted or when there is a need to emphasize the researcher's role as a partner instead of as an expert are when RAP is most appropriate (Beebe, 2001). A six-member RAP team was established which included one homemaker and patron serving on the board of education, one early childhood specialist and parent serving on the board of education, an elementary building principal with two children attending school in the school district, a secondary building principal, a patron employed as a secretary, and a patron working as a delivery driver. The six-member Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) team served as the investigators in the study and presented the list of recommended activities from *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools* (Boschee & Hold, 1999) to the 140 participants in the community and asked them to rand-order the activities from most to least influential.

Data Analysis and Results

For the purpose of this study, investigator triangulation (the use of several different researchers), theory triangulation (the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data), and methodological triangulation (the use of multiple methods to study a single problem) were utilized (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The six-member RAP team served as the investigators in this study. Theory triangulation was accomplished through the discussions, analysis of data and interpretation of data by two university professors and one school district administrator. Methodological triangulation was completed through the utilization of the questionnaire, multiple interviews (Table 3) and document collection. Data, including the listing of recommendations presented in *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools* (Boschee & Holt, 1999) and tape recorded, semi-structured interviews (Table 3) were also completed to determine the results of this study (Beebe, 2001).

The sample consisted of 140 participants. The Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) team was comprised of six representatives from the community. The results, obtained from asking participants to rank-order the perceived influence of recommendations for successful bond issues as presented in *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools* (Boschee & Holt, 1999), indicated that all eleven suggested activities appeared to be important, but a few of the recommendations were overwhelmingly

perceived as influential in the passage of the school district's 2001 and 2003 bond elections.

The questionnaire provided the following statement to the 140 participants: "Rank-order this list of recommended activities in priority of significance to the passage of the 2001 and 2003 bond elections." The data in Table 1 presents the categorization of the 140 participants and how each of the six groups viewed the impact of the eleven recommended activities upon the two successful bond elections in this case study rural school district.

Table 1.

Data from the Questionnaire of the 140 Participants (Reported as N)

Recommended Activity	BOE	Adm	Faculty	Staff	Parents	Patrons	Total
The board and administrators establishing a diverse community task force or facilities study committee	4/5	4/6	8/35	4/14	12/47	17/33	49/140
Disseminated information and public relations activities focused on the benefits to children and the community	1/5	0/6	8/35	3/14	14/47	5/33	31/140
A unanimous vote of support by the board of education	0/5	0/6	5/35	2/14	5/47	2/33	14/140
Keeping the school designs simple and utilizing existing capital outlay funds	0/5	2/6	2/35	1/14	5/47	4/33	14/140
Spending resources and time to get "yes" voters to the polls rather than spending resources and time trying to change people's minds	0/5	0/6	5/35	1/14	4/47	1/33	11/140
The utilization of school bond consultants, an architect and other trained individuals to educate the community	0/5	0/6	2/35	2/14	2/47	1/33	7/140
Administrators and board members keeping a low profile and community patrons carrying the message to support the bond issues	0/5	0/6	0/35	1/14	2/47	3/33	6/140
The use of flyers, brochures, questions-and-answer pamphlets, and other printed materials to inform the community	0/5	0/6	3/35	0/14	1/47	0/33	4/140
The involvement of the local media	0/5	0/6	1/35	0/14	1/47	0/33	2/140
The school district's collaboration with other governmental agencies	0/5	0/6	0/35	0/14	1/47	0/33	1/140
The school board and administration obtaining advice from school districts that had previously won bond elections	0/5	0/6	1/35	0/14	0/47	0/33	1/140

Based on data in Table 1, the percentage of participants and the recommended activity believed to be most significant in the 2001 and 2003 bond elections are presented in Table 2. The table identifies the eleven recommended activities and the results from the questionnaire completed by the 140 participants.

Table 2.

Population's Percentage of Recommended Activities (Boschee & Holt, 1999), When Asked to Consider the MOST Significant Influence on the School District's 2001 & 2003 Bond Issues.

The board and administrators establishing a diverse community task force or facilities study committee.	35%
Disseminated information and public relations activities focused on the benefits to children and the community.	22%
A unanimous vote of support by the board of education.	10%
Keeping the school designs simple ad utilizing existing capital outlay funds	10%
Spending resources and time to get "yes" voters to the polls rather than spending resources and time trying to change people's minds.	8%
The utilization of school bond consultants, and architect and other trained individuals to educate the community.	5%
Administrators and board members keeping a low profile and community patrons carrying the message to support the bond issues.	4%
The use of flyers, brochures, question-and-answer pamphlets, and other printed materials to inform the community.	3%
The involvement of the local media.	1%
The school district's collaboration with other governmental agencies.	1%
The school board and administration obtaining advice from school districts that had previously won bond elections.	1%

In addition, data were collected to determine why selected recommendations were viewed as more influential than other suggested activities. Through personal observations, interviews and the opportunity to listen to individual stories, the RAP team identified key reasons to support the findings through triangulation (Beebe, 2001). Data from these interviews are compiled in a conceptual clustered matrix as presented in Table 3.

The RAP team found the facilities committee utilized in the school district's 2001 and 2003 bond elections was believed to be much more influential with and representative of the community. The facilities task force was comprised of "well-respected and trusted" citizens representing all facets of the community. According to the data, the facilities committee in the 2001 and 2003 bond elections was a "better representation" and "more willing to listen" to everyone than in the previous unsuccessful bond elections of 1995 and 1998. The RAP team revealed that the facilities committee was comprised of "ordinary people" in the community representing "those members of our community who did have a voice." The change in the school district's facilities committee appears to have swayed "no" voters to support the 2001 and 2003 bond elections. From the listed activities for successful bond elections (Boschee & Holt, 1999), establishing a diverse community task force proved to be the most significant with 35% of the sample population listing it as most influential.

Research indicates the message during the school district's campaign was presented by trusted citizens, including those representatives from the school district. The presentations focused on how new and modern school facilities could improve the community and school district. The researchers found key words and phrases to describe the message provided to community patrons during the school district's campaigns, including: "open," "honest," "everything was explained with no perceived hidden agenda," and it was "a cost effective plan providing modern facilities for our kids' future."

Additionally, the dialogue with patrons focused on the need to improve facilities for kids. The information disseminated to the public focused on the benefits of expanding technology, improving heating/cooling in classrooms, providing more appropriate learning space for elementary children and ensuring safer facilities. Data found citizens believed in providing a "21st century education was vital" and the learning environment should be an "atmosphere that is comfortable and safe." The school district's campaign highlighted elevator access, larger classrooms, improved lighting, heating and cooling, and secure entrances and exits. The school district also presented plans to provide for parent drop-offs in front and bus drop-offs in back of each elementary school. Interviews indicated this part of the plan was very important to parents and viewed as "something the school district should have done years ago." In this study, 22% of the sample population believed the importance of the message was critical to the passage of the 2001 and 2003 bond elections.

Table 3.

Sample Interview Questions and Sample Themes from Interviews by the Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) Team

Sample Interview Questions	Sample Major Themes
Why do you believe the 2001 and 2003 bond elections were successful?	• community task force • trust from the citizens • benefits to children • no waste • built what was only necessary; facilities committee • school leadership
What were your thoughts about the community task force?	• provided trust in the plan • spoke with one voice • supportive of kids • ordinary people • diverse group • listened to patrons • trustworthy people
Why did the 1995 and 1998 bond elections fail?	• no trust in the board • no answers to questions • too expensive • not what the community supported • no leadership • lack of trust • administration failed to listen
Why do you believe that 35% of the sample population considered the community task force to be most significant?	• good people • task force was trusted • members listened and responded to questions • trustworthy • honest • represented the community • ordinary citizens willing to listen
Why do you believe that 22% of the sample population considered the activities focusing on children and the community to be most significant?	• community supports kids and education • community cares about kids • kids and learning are important • public schools are important • kids are our future • community desires good public schools • safe and up-to-date schools are needed
What did you consider the most critical difference between the two failed bond elections and the two successful bond elections?	• trust in the board and school leadership • trust in the community task force • new district leadership • task force listened • new school board members • vision • cost-effective • input from the community • unanimous board support • effective architect • reasonable plan

Based on the research from this study, the importance of having the board of education unanimously support the school district's bond election was also significant. Listening to community representatives, the researchers found importance in the elected board of education being unified on the bond referendums and willing to help carry the message. Why would we support it if our school board doesn't support it? This was an overriding theme found in the data.

In the study, the RAP team found support in the community for the school district choosing a simple design while utilizing capital outlay and reserve funds. Data also indicated a wide range of community support for the decision to preserve the historical value of the buildings and electing to upgrade and modernize the current facilities. In the two unsuccessful bond elections, the community voted down the school district's proposal to primarily build new facilities.

Implications

Providing the sample with the list of recommended activities (Boschee & Holt, 1999), allowed the researchers the opportunity to learn which activities were believed to be most influential in the 2001 and 2003 bond elections. Using the Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) provided an opportunity to collect data in a timely manner using methods that allowed in-depth study and data for this research (Beebe, 2001). Utilizing a triangulation of data collection, the researchers verified voter influences, beliefs and motives.

To summarize, the need to organize a diverse community task force to study school facilities is critical. The task force, provided with the opportunity to make recommendations, present findings to the community, and communicate the message is imperative for school districts looking for community support. This study suggests the task force include community patrons less likely to follow the mainstream who represent disenfranchised members of the community, and be provided with the opportunity to influence decisions. Data also indicate the focus of the campaign should highlight the benefits for students and the community. Patrons and parents of the sample school district desired modern school facilities for children. In this community, citizens expected school officials to provide a cost-effective plan, which addressed school climate, comfort, security and safety. From the study, 57% or 80 of the140 sample population agreed that these two recommended activities were extremely significant in passing the school district's two bond elections in 2001 and 2003.

Based on research and current literature, all eleven recommended activities (Boschee & Holt, 1999) should be reviewed and considered by school districts expecting community support, because at least one member of the 140 participants in this study believed each activity was the most important factor in the success of the two bond elections. In addition to the eleven suggested activities, the study found other influences as determining factors in the success of the 2001 and 2003 bond elections. Data from conversations with the sample population (Table III) revealed the following additional influences: newly elected board of education members, recently hired district administrators, a new level of trust between the community and school district, and an approximate six-week, positive campaign. Research indicates the message during the school district's campaign was presented by trusted citizens, including those representatives from the school district. The presentations focused on how new and modern school facilities could improve the community and school district. The researchers found key words and phrases to describe the message provided to community patrons during the school district's campaigns, including: "open," "honest," "everything was explained with no perceived hidden agenda," and it was a "cost effective plan providing modern facilities for our kids' future."

Data from the study also showed the importance of taking into account the seven additional recommended activities outlined in *School Bond Success: A Strategy for Building America's Schools, 2nd Edition* (Holt, 2002) when organizing a school bond campaign. These are:

- Successful millage campaigns start with a vision.
- Selection of sites must be clearly understood to be the most appropriate alternatives.
- Consider carefully not only the amount of the millage increase but also the perception of the public to the amount of the increase.
- Involve community leaders, local media, and school staff in the early planning stages of a bond election.
- Review state and federal guidelines to search for alternative funding sources for new facilities.
- Utilize telephone campaigning, coffees in homes, parent-teacher meetings, door-to-door canvassing, and direct mailings from the citizens' committee as techniques for educating the community about the needs of the school district.
- Resources and building plans need to be clearly delineated.

Based on this study, particular attention should be given to the recommended activities that appear to have most significantly influenced the patrons as presented in Table II, Table III and Table IV. Additional activities, as found through interviews, personal contacts utilizing the RAP and further recommended activities as presented above should also be considered.

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