

## Connexions

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# Overcoming Negative Sentiment in Public School Bond Elections: An Analysis of Three Case Studies

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**Summary:** School districts find that success in bond elections is important to continued growth and development of schools. However, many districts find difficulty in developing the stakeholder support required to obtain a passing margin on bond referenda. In addition, research suggests that districts with prior bond election failures are more likely to incur future defeat in attempting bond passage. The purpose of this article is to analyze qualitatively three school districts that achieved bond election success after a prior failure. The results suggest that obtaining the support of teachers, listening and communicating to all stakeholders, and consistently building a foundation of trust to help in overcoming the negative sentiment. These results provide educational administration programs data regarding the importance of relationships in overcoming negative sentiment in bond elections.

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Note: This MODULE has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

## Overcoming Negative Sentiment in Public School Bond Elections: An Analysis of Three Case Studies

Achieving success in bond elections is important for the continued growth of school districts; however, many districts, even those with increasing attendance, are having difficulty getting the support needed to pass bond referenda (Bordelon, 2005; Russell, 2005). Voters are often reluctant to support a measure that will increase their taxes, but each year there are a number of districts that get permission through bond elections to raise taxes for the benefit of their schools. However, while there is little research in this area, over 30 years ago Piele and Hall (1973) noted that a prior failure in a bond election often correlates with future failures. This suggests that there may be underlying factors that need to be addressed to develop the community support required for a successful bond election. Understanding the dynamics of overcoming negative sentiment may provide information to districts for developing a plan for bond election success. What causes voters to vote against bonds? What can the district leadership do to develop support?

This research analyzes three districts that had a successful bond election after prior failures, and the analysis suggests factors associated with overcoming negative sentiment in bond elections. Results indicate that enlisting teachers in the bond process, responding to community concerns and general trust are fundamental factors in bond election success. This research is important for educational administration programs for two reasons: First, it provides foundational research supporting the need for honest communication between district leaders and stakeholders, and second, it supports other research indicating the importance of relationship building for successful school initiatives (Hickey & Simmons,

2005; Hoyle, English & Steffy, 1998; Koetter & Cannon, 1995).

Research on bond elections is sparse (Theobald & Meier, 2002), but that which does exist indicates some general patterns. This prior research has concluded that senior citizens vote against bond elections (Dismuke, 1994; Speer, 1993); minority voters vote in favor of bond elections (Hickey, 2004; Tedin, Matland, & Weiher, 2001); and voters, in general, support districts that are of high quality (Koetter & Cannon, 1995) and exhibit fiscal responsibility in prior district decisions (Hickey & Simmons, 2005). Other studies claim that communication among stakeholders and general district stability are important to obtaining support for bonds (Holt, 1993; Lode, 1999).

Senior citizens tend to vote against bond elections (Dismuke, 1994), although some research has found that a good campaign which educates elderly voters on the educational benefits of the bond, as well as on the tax exemptions allowable by law, may help in soliciting support from this demographic (Tedin et al., 2001). The general belief is that senior citizens do not have a clear connection with the school system, and as a result, they may fail to see the personal benefit of school bonds (Dismuke, 1994; Speer, 1993).

Other demographic research has suggested that African-American and Hispanic voters support bond elections more than white voters (Hickey, 2004; Tedin et al., 2001). The reason for this support is unclear; however, the trend toward minority support fades when trust of district leadership is questioned (Tedin et al., 2001). In addition, Tedin et al. (2001) proposed that white voters may show less support in communities where they are the minority, which aligns with the hypothesis that a lack of personal connection correlates with negative sentiment at the polls.

School quality may be a factor in obtaining support for bond elections (Koetter & Cannon, 1995), as research indicates a trend toward higher state accountability ratings correlating with bond election success (Hickey, 2004). School quality through accountability ratings provides a quantitative measure that is given to the public, but an improved perception of the school is likely to be beneficial. This enhanced perception may occur through consistently responsible use of financial resources (Hickey & Simmons, 2005).

A final factor in bond election success is effective communication. District leadership that exhibits stability and openness to the public earns support for referenda (Hickey & Simmons, 2005). This support is expressed through citizen committees and the involvement of all segments of the community in the process (Holt, 1993). Holt's (1993) research supported the finding that communication makes the greatest difference between success and failure.

The research on bond elections is sparse, although there are some studies and anecdotal data that provide factors for success. However, there is no research on overcoming negative sentiment after a bond election failure, leading to the development of support and success in a later bond election. Qualitative studies of districts that have experienced success after a prior failure may help develop a greater understanding of factors associated with overcoming negative sentiment.

## Method

The use of case studies in qualitative research provides the foundation for understanding the social environment in specific contexts. Cultural-context research examines factors in case studies which are similar (Neuman, 2000). Through an examination of similar cultures, general themes emerge suggesting factors associated with the social system. This research develops the theoretical groundwork for post-positivistic verification through follow-up quantitative methods (Creswell, 2003).

Three school districts located in Texas were chosen because of the turnaround experienced in their most recent bond elections. Each of these districts held a bond election prior to the successful one in which the voters were overwhelmingly against the bond as exhibited by the percentage of votes in favor.

In order to determine factors involved in the turnaround, superintendents of the districts were interviewed. These interviews revolved around two themes, which were explored further from the responses to the two trigger questions: "What do you perceive to be the factors involved in the early bond election failure?" and "What strategies did you use to overcome the negative sentiment before the successful bond election?" In addition to the interviews, archival data from the districts were examined, and descriptive statistics from archived sources (Census 2000 Demographic Profiles, 2000; Texas Education Agency, 2002) were analyzed for factors associated with the original failure and subsequent success. The data provided insight into the social factors (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of both the original bond election failure, as well as the subsequent success. The data obtained were written as case studies, and from these, themes were analyzed and discussed.

## Results

### Case 1: Getting Stakeholders Involved in the Bond Proposal

A rural district held a bond election in February 2002. The community of the district (98.6% white, .5% African-American, 22.3% senior citizens age 65 and over) addressed a proposal presented to the voters that included a 6.8 million dollar construction project that would build a new high school for this district of 850 students. The superintendent, who was from an urban area, hired a large architectural firm from a city 80 miles away. The architects had been through many bond elections in rapidly growing urban and suburban areas, and they laid out a strategy of building in which new construction would be ongoing. This type of plan was fairly costly for a rural district with steady enrollment, and the proposal announced to stakeholders would result in a 34-cent tax increase. The superintendent and the architects believed they had a strong plan, but the voters had the final say. The bond referendum failed with 88% of the votes going against the proposal, and the superintendent ultimately decided to accept employment in another district.

The district promoted the assistant superintendent to the vacated superintendent position. During the initial board meeting, the board informed the new superintendent that they wanted to try the bond again. The new superintendent had to reflect and receive community advice on some of the errors that resulted in an overwhelming negative voter reaction to the previous bond election.

Four themes surfaced whenever the superintendent asked about the problems of the previous bond election. First, there was a general complaint that the facilities the district was currently using were not properly maintained. The community perceived that the current schools would have been in much better condition if district leadership had planned adequately. Second, the previous district leadership was not concerned with advice from teachers and other subordinate district personnel, and as a result, teachers were opposed to the bond. Third, the community was not asked for input on the planning, resulting in a lack of understanding and support. Fourth, there was a lack of trust. The community had been made promises in the past that did not happen, and its members were hesitant to lend support to plans based on the little information they had received.

The superintendent began to take action in order to address these issues. Immediately, he met with teachers and community to solicit their input. He found that most individuals believed the district would be better off renovating and expanding existing facilities instead of building a new one. A facility improvement plan began to develop that included classroom additions, library expansion, cafeteria, offices, and increased technology capability.

The superintendent recommended, and the board approved, hiring an architectural firm that was experienced in working with rural districts. This firm helped outline a plan for accomplishing the goals that originated with the teacher and community feedback. This plan was going to require a bond of 2.5 million dollars, and a potential tax rate increase of 13 cents.

The district leadership began a process of disseminating information regarding the bond package.

Brochures were developed and mailed to voters. Board members, along with other district leadership, met with groups to explain the bond. By law, district funds cannot be expended to promote a bond election, and the district leadership was careful to ensure legality, but there was a need to be open and honest about the future plans and their potential impact on taxpayers.

The result of these actions was a bond election referendum that passed with 54% of the vote. Upon reflection, the superintendent felt there were several factors that influenced a positive vote. First, the stakeholders (teachers and community) were integral to the planning. In fact, the district leadership was interested in other construction, but the input indicated that the voters were not ready for it. Basically, the community created the foundation of the plan, and they were addressing needs expressed for years. Second, the teachers supported the bond election. When the teachers did not believe what was being done, it was difficult for the rest of the community to support it. Finally, there was effective communication. The district wanted to be as informative as possible on the issues impacting the district, and this helped build trust.

#### Case 2: Overcoming a Negative Perception of the District

A district of approximately 2500 students held a bond election in 1998 designed to improve facilities within the district. The construction was going to be for a new high school, which would allow the district to move the junior high into the old high school, intermediate school into the junior high, and the elementary into the intermediate school. Moving the children out of the elementary school was important because of the age of this school. A newspaper article stressed the importance of getting the children out of the elementary school building, stating that a parent was shocked when she took her children to the Elementary School to learn that they had to go outside one building to another one to reach the restroom.

In fact, some members of the community were unhappy that the money from the bond was going to be used to build a high school instead of an elementary. Community members and teachers expressed their concerns about this, but the district leadership moved forward with the plan to build. This created some uncertainty in this town that had a demographic make-up of 75.9% white, 20.2% African-American, 4.4% Hispanic, and 21.8% age 65 and older.

The high school was going to make up the bulk of the \$21 million bond proposition, although \$3 million was designated to improve the Intermediate School, which was going to be the Elementary School after the campuses moved. These plans were presented to the voters in a bond election, and the outcome was 75% against the proposition. Shortly after this defeat, the superintendent accepted employment in another school district.

The new superintendent began in the district in August 2002 with a desire to understand the reasons for a lack of support in bond elections. A review of election outcomes indicated that the district lost a bond referendum in 1984 and 1998. This history clearly suggested a lack of support for educational issues that required a tax increase. In fact, many members of the community stated that the district would never pass a bond.

The superintendent hired a consultant to complete an extensive survey of the community. The survey illuminated several factors that resulted in decreased community support. First, there was a lack of trust in the district leadership. The perception of the previous superintendent was one of an intimidator who dominated the building committees and ignored advice. This lack of trust in the district administration was clearly exhibited in the voting behavior of the teachers, who were strongly opposed to the previous bond.

A second factor, closely related to the trust issue, was that the plans exhibited during the previous bond election were unclear. Although there was a discussion concerning construction, no site was ever determined or presented. In an environment without trust, lack of clarity and precision further exacerbated the issue.

On the first day of school, after the hiring of the new superintendent, a staff development meeting was held where all teachers were asked to list the top five needs of the school district. The first need they stated was to build a new elementary school, and the next request was for better staff development. The superintendent's request for advice, as well as the subsequent action he made to address the teachers' concerns, had the effect of beginning to develop trust between district leadership and faculty. Teachers are often key communicators in the community, and as they felt their influence increase, their vocalized opinions about the plans for the district revealed optimism. As the superintendent stated after spending time with the teachers and community, the failure of the previous bond was "totally a trust issue."

A new facilities committee was created and it met regularly for several months. It had the responsibility to research and develop a plan for the proposed bond. The committee wanted to be able to answer the toughest questions of the community. After developing this plan, the members led a town hall meeting to discuss the proposal. The meeting had 600 community members in attendance to hear the bond proposal. The consensus from this meeting was that the plan was good except for two things—the attendees wanted to see the bond include a new band hall and an enlargement of the high school library.

These suggestions were added to the bond package, and the plan to present it at the ballot box was developed. In developing the ballots, the bond committee and district leadership decided to address the trust issue even further. They outlined on the ballots what the funds would be used to purchase; furthermore, they provided three separate propositions for the voters to consider. The first proposition provided for the construction of the elementary school, and a new gym and dressing room for the middle school. This proposition would resolve the top needs, which were an elementary facility and a new gym since the current middle school gym was old and without dressing rooms.

Proposition two would provide the funds for a career and technology facility, and renovate the science classrooms at the middle school. Proposition three would improve the athletic facilities. This proposition was designed to focus on the girls' facilities in order to provide Title IX equity.

In addition to developing the propositions, the district leadership wanted to ensure continued maintenance and efficiency. This was accomplished through a strategy to replace air conditioners in the district and demonstrate evidence of better general maintenance.

The date used for the bond election was part of the strategy as well. The plan was to set a date that corresponded with the early part of the football season, and early voting booths were set up at the high school during a home football game. The district wanted to have a large voter turnout, and this strategy provided for it.

The result was positive. Proposition one passed with 68% in favor, proposition two had 64% in favor, and proposition three had 61% in favor. The efforts to communicate with voters, clarify goals, and build trust resulted in strong support at the polls.

### Case 3: Overcoming Organized Opposition to Bonds

The district of 17,000 students had an infrastructure that was beginning to crumble. Portable buildings existed on most campuses, and many of the schools were old and inadequate. A 2002 bond proposal sought to accomplish the goal of improving this infrastructure; however, early in the development of the bond many influential individuals vocally opposed it, stating that a \$293 million referendum was too large and did not focus upon the most important needs of the district. As a result, support diminished and the bond proposal failed. There were only 32% of the voters in favor of the bond, which came from a community that was 61.9% white, 26.6% African-American, and 15.8% Hispanic. In addition, 15.2% of the community was senior citizens age 65 and older.

The district superintendent involved with this bond retired soon after the referendum defeat. The district

need for a bond had not changed, and the new superintendent hired by the school board was quickly made aware of this need. The superintendent took the job knowing he would be expected to develop a plan resulting in a successful bond election.

Immediately, the new superintendent began to meet with community members in order to determine the factors involved in the failure of the first bond election. Through community interaction he determined that there were doubts about the district's ability to handle funds and concerns about the insufficient detail in previous plans. For example, the bond plan did not include in the costs the amount needed for demolition, which would be considerable. In addition, the community felt that a multi-phased approach to a bond would be better, but the previous bond proposal included all concerns in the district, and the \$293 million package was too intimidating. Such intense anti-tax sentiment existed that a consulting group had been hired by members of the community to campaign against the bond.

The new superintendent listened to the community members and acknowledged their concerns, but he wanted the district's focus to be on student achievement. His communication to stakeholders addressed this mission, and other issues were peripheral to this purpose. One of the peripheral goals was to improve financial accountability, so he restructured the central office to focus more clearly on student needs and eliminate positions not associated with this mission; and then he developed a long-term preventive maintenance plan to ensure increased use of existing facilities.

A company whose expertise is analyzing educational facilities completed an audit of the district that was presented publicly. The audit indicated the areas in vital need for improvement, and a plan was developed to address these needs. The plan included the need for bond funds to allow for construction and renovation.

With the district focused on student achievement and financial accountability, and facilities being described by an auditor as an important component to developing the mission of the district, the superintendent was ready to move forward with the bond proposal. From his first day on the job, the new superintendent wanted to be open and clear with information about the district. He also wanted to be able to answer any and all concerns from the voters.

The increased openness became a catalyst for overcoming the negative sentiment. Key people in the community began to vocally give their support for the bond election. Newspaper editorials were generally positive, and local radio personalities discussed the benefits. A community "get out the vote" committee formed and began receiving donations to handle expenses during a campaign in favor of the bond. All of this was occurring in a town that was traditionally anti-tax. The new district leadership had communicated effectively both verbally and through previous actions to increase student achievement, financial accountability, and community input.

Although there appeared to be significant support, legitimate concern arose because of the voter precedents in the community. Historically, any attempt to raise taxes was challenged, and it often met with defeat. Nevertheless, the bond election was held on a uniform voting date with the expectation of greater voter turnout. One proposition was placed on the ballot for \$96 million. The result was a positive outcome with 68% of the voters approving the bond referendum.

## Discussion

Each of the three bond elections researched varied significantly in size and demographic make-up, and each had some unique issues. Despite these differences, similarities in actions taken to overcome negative sentiment, which provided the foundation for bond election success, emerged in each case. These included the earning of trust, development of support among district employees, and communication with the stakeholders in general. Although each successful bond election occurred after a change in district leadership, this was not a factor in choosing the districts for this research; however, this fact may underline

the importance of district leadership in bond election success.

### Earning of Trust

Trust becomes one of the foremost factors in the ability to plan a successful bond election after prior failures. The superintendents interviewed in the case studies perceived that the negative sentiment was due to a lack of trust between district leadership and voters. This perception is supported by the community feedback received by the superintendents during their research upon entering the districts, as well as the simple fact that new leadership was in place during the successful bond election. The previous superintendents may have been able to improve voter trust, but if they were a part of the district leadership when trust was compromised, altering perception would likely be difficult.

The superintendents believed trust was the foundational issue that must be addressed, and they addressed it in several ways. One means of addressing trust was asking for less of a commitment from the stakeholders. Each successful bond was less than the previous failure, but the superintendents did not believe this was a major factor in the change in sentiment. However, the district leadership felt it was important to exhibit responsibility with a smaller bond election to build the trust of the community.

Handling the funds from the bond election would occur after success, but the district leadership had to develop the foundation of trust through listening to stakeholders. Sometimes, this occurs by working with teachers. Teachers have more at stake than most other stakeholder groups. If they live in the district, they will feel both the impact of a tax increase and the benefits involved with improved facilities. Despite the potential positive factors, in two of the cases the teachers did not support the original bond election because of lack of trust. Developing teacher support, which will spread because of teachers' influence in the community, is fundamental to a successful bond election.

Although teacher support is fundamental, success in bond elections will require a larger constituency in favor of the referendum. Again, trust is essential. The community needs to believe the district will follow-through on their promises. If there has been a perceived betrayal of this trust in past actions, support would have been difficult to earn. One of the best ways to earn trust, based upon these case studies, is to show fiscal responsibility. This is largely done through streamlining staffing and increasing the maintenance of buildings.

But trust is more than following through on promises. Trust comes from liking the person, or people, or authority. People who "do what they say" are liked because their actions and speech are congruent, and as a result, they are usually trusted. In addition, people tend to like those who are similar to themselves in values and personal characteristics, so the more the district leadership is communicating with stakeholders, the greater the likelihood of developing a feeling of kinship.

### Development of Support

The data also suggested that a fundamental issue involved in acquiring support for bond elections was the development of connections in the district. A school district should create an environment where all factions of the community feel a connection with some individual or group in the school district. The factors involved in obtaining bond election support (i.e., getting the support of teachers, listening to the community, and communicating with all stakeholders) may be viewed as a result of these relationships.

Teachers develop relationships throughout the community. Not only do they teach students, they are integral to parents' understanding educational and social issues. Each teacher has several peripheral relationships that tie others into the familial environment of the school. The potential impact upon others may increase in relation to a teacher's involvement in the community. This explains the importance of teacher support in a bond election. A supportive teacher may positively influence the votes of many community members, and a majority of teachers in favor of the bond may provide the foundation for

success due to its web of influence.

Listening to the community has some of the same effects. As district leaders ask stakeholders their opinions on matters, and this advice is adhered to, there develops a stronger relationship between community and school district. The mutual respect that is created from this process may increase the feeling of oneness, thus increasing the likelihood of bond election support.

### Communication

Lastly, communication is a general mechanism for providing information about the school district and creating connections. Communication about the school district should be ongoing. A sudden desire to express the accomplishments of a district may generate distrust. However, a comprehensive plan to communicate with all stakeholders' information about the district should create a foundation for developing connections. Enlisting disenfranchised stakeholder groups, such as senior citizens, to become a part of the school district may help create the familiarity needed to develop support for the district.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Bond elections are important to the growth of school districts and are not to be planned without understanding one's stakeholders. Although this may be understood as an extension of the kinship bias where relationships with stakeholders foster connectivity, two related practical factors for the failure of bond elections were evident in the case studies. One, the district leadership in the failed attempts did not get the teachers involved with the bond election process. This alienated a demographic that should have been the biggest supporter of the bond election. Teachers not only have the most to gain from the capital improvements, but they also have significant influence in the community. Two, the district leadership in failed attempts did not heed the warning signs from the community in general. As concerns about the bond proposal began to arise, the district leadership either ignored the warnings, or did not have a system in place that provided information on the sentiment of the public.

Finally, along with building relationships, there must be a building of trust. Stakeholders are resistant to support financial measures in districts where there has been a betrayal of trust. Trust transcends the time when bond elections are being held and is developed continually during interactions among district employees and stakeholders, as well as proven through actions that exhibit fiscal responsibility. This foundation is important in all endeavors, but may be recognized more clearly during voting time, which provides a quantitative measure of stakeholder support.

Addressing these factors was important for overcoming negative sentiment in the case studies. The superintendents analyzed the prior failures to help guide them in strategies for bond election success. Based upon these studies, the following steps are recommended for handling bond elections, especially where there is underlying negative sentiment:

1. The district leadership should meet with teachers early and often about bond election plans. These meetings should have two purposes: to solicit advice and inform of progress. The teachers need to feel a sense of ownership concerning the happenings of the district. As this happens, they may communicate with other stakeholders, which may create synergy about the bond proposal.
2. The district leadership should meet with other stakeholders and be prepared to answer tough questions regarding bond proposals and financial responsibility. The successes in the cases were developed through consistent communication and openness of information with regard to skeptical community members.
3. The district leadership should recognize that achieving success in bond elections is predicated upon a base of support that trusts the district and district leaders, and that trust must be earned daily through kept promises, open communication, and ongoing responsible use of district resources. Once the foundation of trust is achieved, other communication becomes easier.

Each of these suggestions is interdependent. Trust is built through honest communication with teachers and community members, and communication becomes more effective with trust; therefore, trust emerges as the main factor for overcoming negative sentiment.

This research provides an important foundation for the importance of relationships within the community for bond election support, but more importantly, it supports the general need for good communication and openness among stakeholders. Creating an environment that builds upon trust is important for administrators, and educational administration programs need to emphasize this factor in developing community support.

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