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ABSTRACT

While new school construction bond elections for rural school districts can be difficult to pass, success is possible. This paper presents one superintendent's effective campaign to build a $4.2 million elementary school within a rural community. It reveals the need to continually reinforce the message of committing to educational quality combined with productive communication with the school board and continuous efforts to gain community support. Successful school construction bond referendums are shown to have the best chance of success through intense voter registration efforts, continual canvassing, community meetings, and mass mailings to sway public opinion. It is argued that successful passage can also be aided with the creation of a long-range plan designed to convince voters that the need is legitimate.(Contains 12 references). (GR)

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Politics of Building or Renovating Rural School Facilities

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Politics of Rural School Building Bond Elections

"Do you have any experience in bond elections and construction of new facilities?" I was asked in the spring of 1994 as an interview question for the superintendency I continue to enjoy. Like many questions in an interview, this one was prophetic in its signaling of district needs and direction the board would have me pursue. I soon learned that on three previous occasions in the 1990s district voters failed to approve a new elementary school. The mandate was clear and my work was cut out.

In 1989, while a doctoral student at the University of Kansas, I was inspired by a speech by W. Edwards Deming himself. He motivated me to study his Fourteen Points (Deming 1986) and to adapt them to the schools I serve (Bradley 1993; Crawford, Bodine, and Hoglund 1993). Scherkenbach (1988) discusses Deming's first point: create constancy of purpose toward improvement of product and service, saying "only top management can establish the constancy of purpose necessary to know and then meet the customers' needs and expectations. Only they can make policy, establish the set of core values, or set the long-term course for the corporation." (p. 11). This admonition is quite important to me as educational leader and chief executive officer for our rural district of 430 students in a south-central Kansas school district encompassing 308 square miles.

My work these four years has centered on school improvement through the use of Outcomes To Excellence[1] to train one third of our teachers. This training and the staff's commitment to continual improvement resulted in February in a recommendation by an outside peer review committee to grant accreditation by the Kansas State Board of Education through its mandated Quality Performance

[1] developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)

Accreditation process. The second most important area of involvement for me was in building trust in, and support of, our local schools. This trust and the hard work of volunteers resulted in voter approval last December of a $4.2 million bond election to replace our 1921 elementary school. The purpose of this paper is to explain how this was accomplished.

I came to work in July of 1994. My first long range task was to select an outside consultant who could give objective expertise to a study of district facility needs. As a native Kansan it didn't take long talking to superintendent colleagues to learn that G. Kent Stewart, Professor of Education at Kansas State University, was the gentleman who could bring legitimate advice with a down home continence that the patrons would accept. The essential need of a comprehensive facilities study is emphasized by several writers (Conyers and Francl 1989; Fielder 1995; Holt 1994; Surratt 1987; Taylor 1984).

During the previous elections the perception of the board and long time staff was that the regional daily newspaper had not been supportive of the project. Wrangling among patrons in the four towns in the district was apparently more interesting to the paper than the need for a new building. I invited David Seaton, Publisher of the Winfield Daily Courier, to join the School Facilities Study Committee (SFSC), but he declined stating that his paper's responsibility was simply reporting and fearing that participation on the committee would reduce the paper's objectivity. Davis "Buss" Merritt (1995), the former editor of the Wichita Eagle, on the other hand, believed that rather than serve as impartial observers who have no stake in a topic's outcome, journalists should serve more as umpires, or referees and become "fair-minded participants" in the public affairs they write about.

In the three years leading to last December's election, the Courier allowed numerous items sent to the paper to be published. These items were positive, accurate, and the

headlines non-sensational. Most were derived from my weekly "Friday Letter" to the board of education. Knowing that there are numerous other readers of the weekly reports, the writing style is often editorial in nature rather than simply informative, in hopes that the secondary audience is influenced as well as informed.

With the board's endorsement, letters were written in February, 1995, to the mayors of the four small towns in the district inviting each to appoint a representative to the facilities committee. In addition, the board appointed two of its own to serve, the elementary and secondary principals each appointed two staff persons to serve, I asked two cynical persons who attended every BOE meeting, and as word of the new committee spread, at least three persons called and asked to be on the committee. This group of 21 persons was intended to represent each community and segment of the population as suggested by several persons (Holt 1994; Taylor 1984). In harmony with other's experiences and recommendations the committee was established to demonstrate trust: the board's trust in the people on the committee to direct the process, and the community's trust in the committee to represent them. The committee first met all day Saturday, April 22. Lunch was furnished and all seemed to enjoy an interesting and positive day. Notes from the meeting show that the committee perused Stewart's 35 page facilities report furnished to the members prior to the meeting. The committee identified and discussed ten problems with the failed bond proposals, discussed the possibility of remodeling the current building (eight miles north of Burden where the secondary building is located), and agreed on several items to prepare for the next meeting. Of the ten reasons the previous bonds failed, the only one which I could change was: trust. Committee members said they had not trusted the information presented in the previous elections nor my predecessor's integrity. As part of the study some districts use a telephone survey to help

determine the type and level of local support (Conyers and Francl 1989; Surratt 1987).

Prior to the next meeting an architect examined the existing building and prepared a preliminary remodeling plan that included an addition with new kitchen, dining, and early childhood classrooms. The plan included a time frame to build, vacate, then remodel a section, and then another. The plan came with a price of $2.5 million which was also an estimate for construction of a new building across the street. The BOE and SFSC saw the fallacy of this plan and continued to discuss a new facility. There were two more meetings where ideas were discussed.

At some point the committee proposed that a survey be conducted of registered voters and the BOE endorsed this plan. The survey was mailed in January, 1996 and the results discussed at the committee's last meeting on May 9. The survey showed that 42% supported a new building in Burden, 6% supported a new building in Cambridge (4 miles east of Burden), 19% supported a new or remodeled building in Atlanta, while 33% wanted to do nothing at the time.

At the May, 1996 meeting the committee realized that the option of a new building in either Burden or Cambridge had the combined support of 48% of the voters who responded. Assuming the Cambridge voters would prefer a new building in Burden over Atlanta and with 1,250 registered voters, this presumed level of support left a majority vote for a new elementary school in Burden approximately 26 votes short of passage. Any other combination of voter preference would be much harder to get ratified. The SFSC made a recommendation to the BOE to build a new building in Burden. The board endorsed the recommendation the same month, calling for a bond election by the end of 1997. This gave eighteen months to design a building and build support prior to an election. Through the summer and fall cattle prices fell and the wheat crop was disastrous. I spent six months working with several architects leading

to a selection in November, 1996. At an annual planning session in early November, 1996 the board asked me to cancel the architects "Qualifications-Based Selection Process" because of the poor agricultural economic conditions in the district. We waited six months for the next BOE election and improved agricultural prices. By August, 1997, the board was ready to proceed. To speed the process the board asked me to select an architect and bond finance advisor.

Because of my previous visits with architects it was easy to recommend Ken Helmer of Howard & Helmer Architects in Wichita and Steve Shogren of Ranson & Associates to be the financial advisor. Shogren pointed out that we had to move fast to have a special election in 1997. Helmer had been involved in one of the failed elections so had preliminary drawings available for the building desired. At the September meeting the board approved a resolution calling for a bond election to build an elementary school and requested permission from the state board to hold the election and exceed the bond indebtedness limit of 15% of district evaluation.

Working with the county clerk and a law firm with vast experience with school bonds, preparation of the election forms and bond finance documents was started. Shogren discussed with the board the pros and cons of a mail-in ballot and said that with a ten day time frame to mail them back in, it was hard to focus a campaign to "peak" at the right time. The board chose, therefore, to hold a conventional election with voting to be available in each of the four towns.

By the October meeting the board had a firmer budget and financing plans. The board reduced the budget by $50,000 to $4.2 million which allowed the expected mill levy to remain at 19 mills for 23 years. The board thought an upper limit of 20 mills was actually more important to the voters than the actual cost of the project. The board had examined a plan that included a large competition gym, but the cost was $1.1 million higher so they had to choose to have a smaller gym seating only 300. This is

sufficient for practice and non-varsity contests as well as elementary physical education, but does not include a stage or performance platform. The board by this time had examined four versions of the building and made suggestions as had the elementary school staff. The board chose a floor plan and exterior design to use to promote in the election.

Letters were mailed to individuals on the SFSC who had expressed favor for a new building and other individuals that the BOE had suggested who were supporters at the previous elections inviting them to an election planning committee meeting. They were also invited to the board meeting where the design was chosen. Unfortunately, few attended. Central Elementary School Principal, Joe DeWeese, and I decided that those on the committee or involved in previous elections were "too tired" to do it again. He identified three couples with children in the elementary school he thought would be interested and we called them. All three enthusiastically said yes and formed the nucleus of what Shogren named the KIDS Committee (Keep Improving District Schools). These "highly committed individuals" (Holt 1994; Surratt 1987) met in early October, 1996, along with a few other volunteers and two board members (only two to avoid violation of the Kansas open meetings law). There were less than eight weeks to design a campaign, produce printed materials, and promote a large voter turnout.

At the first meeting, Shogren who helps with about a dozen Kansas school elections per year, presented a set of materials that gave factual information about the district's current mill levies (general fund, capital outlay, recreation commission, etc.), history of levies, expected impact of the new bond on various priced homes in the district as well as on 160 acres of pasture or worked land. He also asked the committee members to write out reasons why the new building was needed and to name the sub-committee

on which they wanted to serve. There were four choices: Voter Registration, Ways & Means, Information Central, and Community Relations.

The Voter Registration committee targeted unregistered patrons, sent letters to Central High School graduates in college and 18 year old high school seniors and coordinated phone calls prior to the election. The Ways & Means Committee was responsible for raising money to pay for any functions that were forbidden expenses of the BOE and to control the expenditure of the funds in a coordinated budget and record keeping process. Information Central was responsible for brochures, information sheets, newspaper articles, and coordination of letters to the editor, and advertisements. Community Relations was assigned public meetings, civic group presentations, and door to door visits. The whole committee consisted of only about ten persons so each sub-committee had overlapping and dual or multiple responsibilities. The volunteers were small enough in number that they also served as the Steering Committee making the big decisions on which projects to take on and assigning tasks to the sub-committees.

The steering committee met weekly up through the election on December 2, 1997. Individuals volunteered to serve on the committee on which they felt most comfortable. Parent Darren Wesbrooks took on the duties of over all Chairman and performed magnificently. He was on the phone constantly checking with committee members to assess progress with their assigned tasks. Updated fact sheets were distributed a couple of different times to committee members in order that the most accurate information possible was presented. A decision was reached early in the process not to have large scale public meetings, but concentrate on smaller gatherings. This prevented a few individuals from monopolizing the sessions as they would not necessarily know about or attend each arranged meeting.

Sessions were offered to each of the four town's senior citizen monthly luncheons. The Burden senior citizens appreciated the presentation and made comments like, "it's about time" and "hurry up and get it built, I don't have much time left to help pay for it." The Atlanta senior citizens were gracious and receptive, but obviously not generally supportive. A presentation was scheduled at the Cambridge Senior Citizen Center, but canceled a few days before the luncheon due to "a prior commitment to a singing group." The Grenola senior citizens first said yes, but called back to cancel saying, "we are not allowed to participate in partisan politics." At each presentation a volunteer described the conditions of the current building and the principal reiterated the advantages and enhanced features of a new building. A board member talked about the district's work on school improvement and how the board was committed to student performance as well as protection of district resources (i.e , taxes). Then the superintendent showed wall chart sized posters of the district's tax history and the mill levy affects of the proposed new building.

With a week left before the election, one public meeting was held in Cambridge, a community that had been positive in the previous elections and considered neutral territory in this one. This meeting gave an opportunity for anyone who had not already heard the information presented to do so and removed their chance to say they had had no way to be informed. Most voters apparently had made up their minds by then and so attendance was only the election committee, four individuals in opposition, and about three other persons. The meeting format was the same as in previous presentations and was over in about an hour with no blood shed.

The Voter Registration committee purchased voter registration lists from the election commissioners of the three counties with property in the district. These names were placed into a computer database and compared with parent roster lists furnished by the secretaries of the two schools. Personal calls were placed to parents who were not

registered regardless of knowing their level of support or opposition to the project. It was assumed that most parents would be supportive and like all of the election committees, members could not by state law take a position favoring the election so calls were informational only. They could answer questions and tell how they would vote, but stop short of asking those called to vote for the bond issue. By checking the lists members identified persons who were perceived to favor the bond election, but not registered. They too were called and encouraged to register. Registration was made easier by having a sign-up table at a football game and articles in the paper telling everyone how to become registered. High school seniors who had turned 18 prior to the election were called to the school office where they were registered without suggesting on how to vote, just encouraged to go and vote. Through the high school's senior tracking service, letters were sent out to college aged students updating them on current high school activities (homecoming queens, football game reports, etc.) as well as information about the approaching bond election. They too were encouraged to vote and told how to request an advance ballot without telling them to vote YES. All of these efforts were to help assure a large voter turnout that others had said would help assure passage (Conyers and Francl 1989; Henry 1987; Holt 1994). Shogren had said to recognize that about a third would always vote no, a third would vote yes and so our efforts were to inform and convince the undecided third. Others had said much the same in suggesting that bond promoters ignore no voters and to create yes voters (Carter 1995; Conyers and Francl 1989; Henry 1987).

One of the most fun promotion events was staged by the district's board of education president. He prepared two floats for Burden's Sunflower Festival in early October. One had his daughter dressed in pioneer clothes using a wash board in a tub. He was dressed in long underwear, an old straw hat, and cowboy boots. He was sitting in an outhouse loaded on his flatbed truck. He rode along opening the privy door throwing

out corn cobs. Both floats had large signs that read, "This works, but we can do better. Think about it." The floats were significant as he may be the most successful farmer/rancher in the district and will pay more taxes for the new building than anyone. As a Christian elder who is politically conservative and known for a serious sense of humor his willingness to be so visible in the election process was all the more powerful. He also worked hard with the voter registration efforts.

The Information Central Committee edited several versions of a mail-out brochure prior to printing as well as a one page fact sheet that listed the reasons for the new building as well as its costs and payment plan. One evening, the fact sheets (along with a sketch of the floor plan) were hand carried by committee members and other volunteers to every house in Burden. If home, the residents were given a chance to ask questions and talk as well as encouraged to vote, again without being told how to vote. The 14 by 25 inch, three color tri-folded brochure was mailed one week prior to the election to every box holder and residence in the district. It again gave a drawing of the building, a floor plan, reasons for need, and explanation of financing. It was paid for with district monies as it did not take a position, but was considered an information piece only. Members of this committee wrote a couple of letters to the editors of the papers and were prepared to write more had the opposition submitted letters in opposition.

The Winfield Daily Courier endorsed a positive vote the Friday before the election by saying in part, "voters in Central USD 462 will be wise to approve the bond issue." The editorial went on to say, "it is the right thing for the kids, the district and, in the long run, for Atlanta." The editorial was in the same edition in which a major front page article once again described the new building as well as stated evidence for its need and which included quotes by those in opposition and support. The article was front page news and included a large drawing of the floor plan. The paper's positive

coverage was quite gratifying after three years of hard work. The Courier's stand caused the election process to peak at just the right time.

One member of the Ways & Means Committee solicited every business in Burden for money to promote the election. Most told her that they would not take a favorable stand for fear of retribution by their patrons. She turned to individuals and families for support and was able to raise about $900. This was allocated and spent on Vote YES advertisements in the two local weekly papers in the district as well as two ads in the Courier. These appeared two weeks and one week ahead of the election and were offset by ads by the opposition which also mailed one page information sheets. The committee was amused at the main tag line used by the opposition, "show you care. . . vote no." The district's mailed brochure used a more uplifting line, "the right thing to do. . . the right time to do it!" As this advertisement was paid with donated funds it could take a pro-election stance.

Four days before the election a Vote YES first class post card was mailed to every household with registered voters by the Community Relations Committee. The cost of printing and postage was picked up by the Ways & Means Committee. The post card said:

VOTE YES

ON TUESDAY

You have an opportunity December 2nd to
vote for a new Central Elementary School.

The kids deserve it, and the timing is right.

Our Children....Future....Responsibility!

Paid for by the KIDS Committee with donated funds (Betsy Whitehill, Treasurer)

The Sunday evening before the Tuesday election volunteers made over two hundred phone calls to newly registered voters and others who were suspected to favor the election.

The described actions by committee personnel; favorable agricultural conditions; the patrons improved trust in the BOE's leadership, the superintendent, and the quality of instruction resulted in passage of the first bond election in the district since 1971. It passed by forty votes (52% yes to 48% no, a spread of 4.7%) out of a total of 846 votes cast (65% of those registered).

As suggested by Taylor (1984) the district's success was aided by the creation of a long-range plan that convinced the patrons the need was legitimate. The plan also provided a financial description that was understandable and adequate for the desired construction while not denying the ongoing needs for instructional needs. In addition, the plan provided for citizen participation in establishing the need and promotion of the election (Holt 1994; Taylor 1984).

I'm convinced that the well designed process was not manipulative. The voters perceived the campaign to be honest and convincing. The hard work over the short campaign period was a strain on all involved, but rewarding too. A mandate would have been great, but the difficulty of coalescing four small towns that are still upset over consolidation thirty years ago, makes a 4.5% margin seem huge. It was at least sufficient, and that's all that was needed.

Since the bond election was successful those involved concluded it was a fun undertaking and worthwhile. Now that we are four months into final design and specification writing it is still surreal. Some predict that within six months of the new school's opening no one will be found who will admit that they voted against such a beautiful, effective building. I hope that prediction is true.

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