



WHITE PAPER

## What next?

### Lessons from districts that overcame election night disappointment

It's a shock to the district's leadership, to the staff, and to the passionate supporters when a ballot proposal fails on Election Night. All that belief, all that commitment, all that emotional energy, and no success at the ballot box. Whether the margin was one vote or many thousands, the emotional toll is enormous.

In 25 years of working with school districts on patron relationship issues, we've seen the gamut of those emotions. From "What did we do wrong?" to "If only we had worked harder" to "What didn't they – the voters – understand?" the search for answers begins immediately. The results of that search are often incomplete, because they must pass through the filter of disappointment.

What we've learned from conducting follow-up studies for districts that had a rough night at the ballot box is the following:

- **Quick "repeats" are rarely successful**  
Assuming it was a failure of message, effort, or timing, school districts might think about simply rerunning the proposal at the next election opportunity. History shows your chances of being successful are slim, and you create much more animosity with your patrons who think – rightfully so – that they already gave you an answer on your proposal.
- **Acknowledging – but not bemoaning – the loss is critical**  
Districts that step forward promptly and say, "We are, of course, disappointed with the results. We will be taking time to understand how our patrons want us to proceed," are setting the right tone. This lets the naysayers hear their "message" was received, while also keeping it as positive as possible for supporters and those who were apathetic.

- **Overwhelm your patrons and staff with fact-finding efforts**

Now is not the time to hide and “conduct meetings in secret.” Instead, talk openly about the options that are in front of you, and the kinds of conversations that are taking place as you plan your next steps. Invite suggestions. Create an e-mail address to receive comments about this issue. Have a staff member be a resource for those patrons wishing to share thoughts. Engage staff by asking them why they think voters responded poorly. Conduct research to find out what went wrong. In other words, overwhelm patrons with demonstrations of your desire to connect.

- **Simplify and personalize your messages**

Once you settle on your follow-up ballot proposal, create messages that are simple and benefit-driven. Leave the exhaustive detail for your website, and keep the more broadly used messages focused on key points that patrons, in our research, have told us they need to know as they are making their voting decision: What’s in the proposal? What will it cost me? Why should I vote for it? In other words, it’s not “this proposal will add eight classrooms to the high school,” it’s “expanding by eight classrooms will create more educational opportunities for students.” Focus on the benefits, not the features.

- **Be honest, but avoid scare tactics**

If your original ballot proposal was driven by need, then the need is likely to be even more acute when your follow-up proposal is placed on the ballot. However, resist the temptation to put out messages that threaten voters with dire consequences if the proposal fails. Instead, focus on the facts: If it passes, X will happen. If not, Y will happen. Blasé, matter-of-fact language is the best way to go, and it respects your patrons’ ability to make an appropriate judgment, based on the facts.

- **Hit the streets**

It’s no surprise campaigns that have large committees whose members pound the pavement typically have a better chance on Election Day than those with slick campaign literature, fancy websites, and eye-catching yard signs. Neighbors asking neighbors to vote “yes” is powerful – even if the neighbors don’t know each other.

- **Respond to organized opposition with facts**

If your opposition becomes organized and starts putting up their own yard signs and websites, don’t let them get under your skin. Rather, correct their misinformation with simple statements that begin with, “Actually, the fact is…” It takes all the air out of their balloon, and shows the district is level-headed.

Above all, after an appropriate period of mourning, work hard to keep spirits up. Patrons sent a message on Election Day. If you are diligent about uncovering the details behind the defeat, you can create a strategy that gives you the best opportunity to succeed the next time around, and re-energize your volunteers, staff and parents at the same time.