

**Referendum 2001: A look back to the future.**

By Dick Bernard

After the 184 local referendums of November, 2001, I noted an intriguing fact: the smaller the school district holding the election, the greater its probability of success.

The statistics were clear:

Metro districts	34.4% successful
Non-Metro over 2000	61.5%
Non-Metro 1000-2000	65.1%
Non-Metro 500-1000	82.0%
Non-Metro Below 500	93.5%

The places with the smallest potential resources to marshal a sophisticated campaign succeeded at a remarkably higher rate than their wealthier cousins in the larger cities who could marshal more resources.

**Why was this so? My theory: more than any other factor, success flows from the Long Term Quality of the Relationship between School District and Community. This cannot be generated, and retained, simply during a campaign period.**

In early January, Superintendents in the referendum districts were asked two very brief e-mail questions:

- 1) How many registered voters in your November referendum?
- 2) What percent actually cast ballots?

Ultimately, three-fourths of the administrators responded. (For the remaining 46, data was secured from other sources.) The preliminary results<sup>1</sup>:

#Reg. Voters	Districts	#Registered	#Voting	% Voting
10,000 +	43	1,385,652	474,196	34.2%
under 10,000	139	458,914	172,416	37.6%
Total	182 (of 184)	1,844,566	646,612	35.1%

**Several observations seem especially relevant:**

- The smaller districts had far greater success in passing their issues.
- The smaller districts over-all had a significantly higher voter turnout. This, in combination with long-term positive relationships, can make all the difference. (Ex. "We love him out here" - from a school secretary talking about their superintendent in a community which easily passed its issue).
- The total voter turnout of 35% was half of the voter turnout (68%) in the 2000 Presidential election. This signals a disconnect between local schools and their communities.
- An unknown, but very large number of potential voters in all elections do not even bother to register to vote. Every potential voter can influence others, positively or negatively.
- The margin between "yes" and "no" was tiny: A report by MCF Consulting Group after the election showed that if all votes were added together, the referendum margin was 1% overall; for the metro area, it was two-tenths of one percent. This is zero

<sup>1</sup> For additional information, [www.chez-nous.net](http://www.chez-nous.net) click outside the walls and note first paragraph.

margin for error, particularly with a small turnout - last minute negative campaigns can easily do fatal damage.

**• In this survey, for some reason, one-fourth of the school districts felt it unnecessary to respond to a taxpaying citizen's request for public information easily accessible to the district, but not to the citizen.**

**The following points deserve particularly careful and serious consideration by everyone connected with public schools.**

**• Every potential vote counts, which means that every potential opening for building a positive relationship with all citizens is critical:** There is no alternative option. This is especially true when two-thirds or more of any community's citizens are "outside the walls", with no day-to-day direct relationship to the schools. School districts cannot compete with expensive political campaigns. But the day-to-day business of building and sustaining positive relationships through the entire community is absolutely essential and is, in fact, the real and permanent campaign. There are countless good and inexpensive ways to build good relationships, but all require personal effort, and cannot be delegated - or restricted - to the superintendent and school board alone. They require delegating - and accepting - of power by the various constituencies in a school district, including individual employees and union leadership.

**• There are, today, numerous ways to communicate, some much better than others. Person-to-person will never be replaced as #1:** In August, 1991, the respected journal *pr reporter* published a list ranking a dozen then-common means of communication. By far the most effective means, then, was person-to-person.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the present day sophistication, e-mail, web sites, etc., it is highly doubtful that any other means will ever be more effective than person-to-person.

**• Citizens with questions deserve honest answers, pronto! Inaction has public relations consequences.** I am an individual citizen, a Minnesota taxpayer "outside the walls" of public education. As best as I can figure, 80% of several thousand dollars taxes we contributed for public education last year came to schools through state taxes. We are shareholders in every Minnesota school district. Still, two months after I had asked my two questions of 184 districts, one-fourth had not responded in any way, and never did respond.

(When I reported my frustration about difficulty in receiving public data from local schools, a school PR friend, asked "did you offer to send them the results of the survey?" I answered "no" - though I had immediately thanked everyone who responded, and gave a preliminary result to the 72 who responded within the first two weeks. Now everyone, including those who weren't asked the question, has the results. But should there be a presumption of a "quid pro quo" when an individual taxpayer asks a question? I think not.)

**• Make certain your district is communications-accessible to "outsiders".** When I elected to use the most recent CFL Directory to secure Superintendents e-mail

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<sup>2</sup> In order of effectiveness: One-to-one, face-to-face; small group discussion/meeting; speaking before a large group; phone conversation; hand-written, personal note; Typewritten, personal letter not generated by computer; computer generated or word processing generated "personal" letter; mass-produced, non-personal letter; brochure or pamphlet sent out as a "direct mail" piece; article in organizational newsletter, magazine, tabloid; news carried in popular press; advertising in newspapers, radio, tv, mags, posters, etc.; other less effective forms (billboards, skywriters, etc.)

addresses, I anticipated good data. Every district has e-mail. But in the Directory, only 40% of the e-addresses were correct. They were 1998-99 addresses. (The 2001-2002 CFL Directory was not available until April, 2002, and does not include e-addresses or websites). Using school district web sites to find a contact point was often even more frustrating. None seem to make occasional visitors a priority. Make absolutely certain that a one-time visitor to your district who has a question can easily ask it, and then receive a prompt and honest answer. Continuing quality customer service will pay big dividends. How about asking an outsider to evaluate such accessibility of all your communications tools?

The last word? Analysis of data is fine. Change in approach, especially to those "outside the walls" is most critical to future success. The status quo is not good enough.

The author of this article, Dick Bernard, is a retired grandfather of public school children. Before retirement he worked 36 years as a public school teacher, and representative of public school teachers through MEA and Education Minnesota. He is past-president of Minnesota School Public Relations Association, and is now consulting, "Looking at Public Schools from Outside the Walls". He can be reached at [dick@chez-nous.net](mailto:dick@chez-nous.net), 6905 Romeo Road, Woodbury MN 55125-2421, 651-730-4849.