



How Public School Districts Communication Strategies Impact Levies in Ohio

Citation

Gagne, Joseph. 2018. How Public School Districts Communication Strategies Impact Levies in Ohio. Master's thesis, Harvard Extension School.

Link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42004008>

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

How Public School Districts Communication Strategies
Impact Levies in Ohio

Joseph J. Gagne Jr.

A Thesis in the Field of Government for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in
Extension Studies

Harvard University

June 2017

Abstract

This study explored the relationship between the communications strategies used by public school districts and the success of levy votes used to determine levels of school district funding. In particular, it investigated whether public school districts in Ohio that engage in pro-active, two-way communications prior to going on the ballot and campaigning for a tax increase levy are more likely to succeed than districts that do not engage in such activities. This question also leads to a significant follow up: What is the role of district leadership (i.e., school district superintendent) in creating and fostering a culture that values ongoing, pro-active two-way communication with the community?

Data were drawn from academic literature, personal interviews with district leadership, and primary materials (i.e., school newsletters and records of social media content) in three, detail-rich case studies of specific levy campaigns in Ohio. By identifying emerging themes across these case studies, this study argued that a school district can employ seven effective factors to achieve success at the levy ballot: 1) hiring communication-consulting help for the school district; 2) employing survey research (or polling) on the entire population of the school district's community to assess views and priorities related to support for school funding; 3) mailing traditional community newsletters to the community at large; 4) employing social media; 5) employing two-way communications strategies ranging from tweet-ups to coffee klatches; 6) engaging in personal interaction in which district leadership meets with community members in a town hall style format, cultural events, coffee klatches, or one on one meetings; and finally 7) district leadership's influencing the school district culture and perception of the

school district to fit the needs and desires of the community so as to instill the community's confidence that additional revenue constitutes a worthy investment.

This research suggested that engaging in proactive two-way communications constitutes a highly successful strategy in levy passage and therefore does make expenditures associated with it worthwhile. However, the amount of such resources actually spent would depend on the particular district's situation and so must be decided on a case-by-case basis by the district itself. Findings offer insights for broader questions of the importance of two-way communications in building support for public institutions.

Dedication

To my loving family: my wife Meg Ansara and our children Tessa, Seamus and Owen.

So many days and nights I was away from you to do this work. Thank you for putting up with me. I love you all more than you will ever know.

Also to my Mom and Dad: Donna and Joe Gagne. You never gave up on me and were there for me when I really needed you. I love you both so much and I hope are as proud of this as I am.

Acknowledgements

The first person I have to recognize is my advisor: Dr. Joshua Goodman Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Dr. Goodman gave me the perfect blend of guidance and freedom to make this thesis work. A math teacher in Watertown Public Schools, he had an appreciation and understanding of the material that made him such a pleasure to work with. Dr. Luke Shaefer Associate Professor and Director, Poverty Solutions at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at University of Michigan. Luke was the driving force behind this thesis. Without his support, encouragement, and countless times he made me come up to Michigan and lock me in a room at the Ford School to write...this thesis would not have happened. I am in debt to him for his support. I am also grateful to have the support of Dr. Mary Graybeal who was huge support for me on the research, editing and navigation of academia, she brought out the best of my work and talent.

I also want to thank the three superintendents who participated in this study. Dr. John Marschhausen, Richard Hanes, and Paul Imhoff. They are the truest examples of public servants. Spending countless hours away from their families to advocate and fight for their public school districts. They were exceptionally busy and I am so grateful they were able to give me the time I needed to interview them and follow up to discuss each case study. Without their help the research would not have been possible. Then there is my wife: Meg Ansara, without her love and support I would have never started this project. Her support never waivered, even when she was alone with three children while I was researching and writing. Thank you Babe...I love you...

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	x
Introduction.....	1
Rationale for Situating the Study in Ohio.....	5
Selection of School Districts.....	6
Structure of Thesis	8
Definition of Terms.....	8
Literature Review.....	11
Ohio-Dominated Studies.....	12
Factors over Which District Leadership Has No Control.....	14
Factors over Which District Leadership Has Control.....	17
Research Questions	20
Case Study 1: Piqua, Ohio	23
Case Study 2: Hilliard, Ohio.....	35
Case Study 3: Upper Arlington, Ohio.....	47
Discussion.....	57
Hiring Communication Consulting Help	59
Survey Research.....	60

Newsletters/Direct Mail	63
Social Media	66
Two-Way Communication.....	68
Personal Interaction	70
Interpretation of Superintendent Role.....	72
Conclusion	74
Conclusion	76
Contributions of Study	77
Study Limitations.....	79
Future Research	80
Bibliography	81

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of communication techniques and methods employed in the case studies.	58
---	----

List of Figures

Figure 1. Trends in American Public Schooling from 1970 through 2012 (Source: Coulson, 2014, p. 2).....	2
Figure 2. One-way communication. Source: Florence (2004).....	64
Figure 3. Two-way communication. Source: Florence (2014).	69

Introduction

Late in the twentieth century, traditional public schools in America have been the subject of a rigorous debate focused on steep increases in per-pupil spending and relatively high levels of taxpayer support combined with relatively low student test scores compared to other countries (see Figure 1).¹ While student test scores have either remained constant or declined over recent decades, per-pupil education costs have skyrocketed to give the U.S. one of the highest per-pupil expenditures in the world.² This pattern of rapidly increasing per-pupil costs unaccompanied by comparable increases in test scores has led to increased scrutiny of funding of traditional public schools and other public entities.³

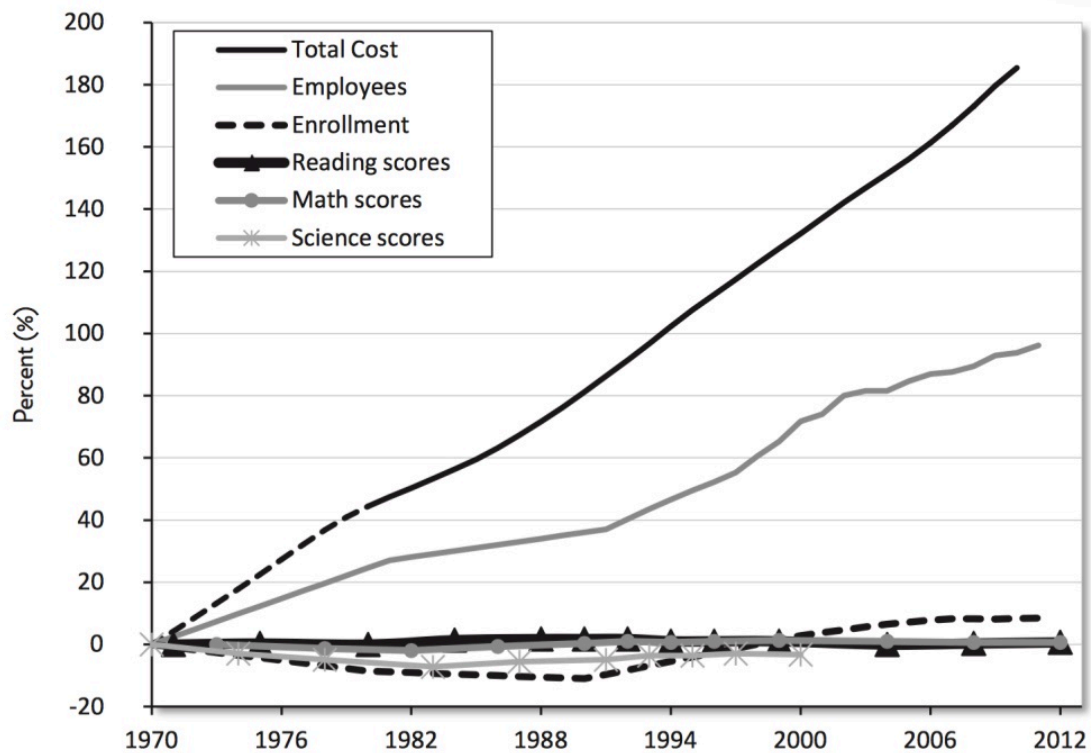
However, some studies have challenged the apparent disconnect between dramatically increased spending and improved student educational outcomes. Jackson, Johnson, and Persico (2016) contend that test scores represent weak indicators of educational attainment and, in particular, of such important long-term educational

¹ Andrew J. Coulson, “State Education Trends Academic Performance and Spending over the Past 40 Years,” *Cato Analysis Policy Analysis* 746 (2014), <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa746.pdf>, 2.

² Marcia Clemmitt, “School Reform,” *CQ Researcher* 21 (201): 388.

³ Ibid.

outcomes as adult earnings.⁴ Moreover, they point out that many changes in school funding are designed to increase resources to districts that are particularly at risk for low performance because of district demographic factors (e.g., high percentage of low income families). In these situations, poor educational outcomes are unrelated to quality of schools but are rooted instead in district characteristics and thus are unaffected by increased funding.



Sources: U.S. Department of Education, "Digest of Education Statistics"; and NAEP tests, "Long Term Trends, 17-Year-Olds."

Note: "Total cost" is the full amount spent on the K-12 education of a student graduating in the given year, adjusted for inflation. In 1970, the amount was \$56,903; in 2010, the amount was \$164,426.

Figure 1. Trends in American Public Schooling from 1970 through 2012 (Source: Coulson, 2014, 2).

⁴ C. Kirabo Jackson, Rucker C. Johnson, and Claudia Persico, "The Effects of School Spending on Educational Economic Outcomes: Evidence from School Finance Reforms," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131, no. 1 (2016): 187-204.

Conducting a study designed to explore the effects of “exogenous” factors in school spending, i.e., ones that are unrelated to district characteristics, on long-term outcomes, these authors found evidence that increased spending can have a dramatic effect on these outcomes in the form of higher academic performance and greater student economic mobility in adulthood. In particular, the data they collected predict that, “for children from low-income families, ... increases in school spending are associated with increases in adult economic attainment in line with their educational improvements, and likely reflect improvements in both the quantity and quality of education received,” resulting in “important positive effects on adult wages, family income, and poverty status.”⁵ Specifically, a 10 percent increase in spending per-student for each of the 12 years the student attends public school is associated with approximately “0.5 additional years of completed education, 9.6 percent higher wages, and a 6.1-percentage-point reduction in the annual incidence of adult poverty.”⁶

The most significant type of community support resulting in increased public school funding is voting to increase local property or income taxes. In Ohio, where the current study was situated, traditional public schools look to their communities for increases in funding for operational and infrastructure improvements. Requests for increased funding are operationalized as elections, referred to as “levies,” in which a majority of qualified voters either approves (i.e., votes in favor of) or rejects an increase in taxes for this purpose.

⁵ C. Kirabo Jackson, Rucker C. Johnson, and Claudia Persico, “Boosting Educational Attainment and Adult Earnings,” *Education Next* 15, no. 4 (2015), <http://educationnext.org/boosting-education-attainment-adult-earnings-school-spending/>.

⁶ Ibid.

At the same time, levies are sometimes difficult to pass, often requiring two, three, or more votes before a majority of voters are convinced of the need and so vote to pass them. Moreover, districts typically mount campaigns to make the voters aware of the upcoming vote and to convince voters to approve them. These levies can themselves entail significant expenditures of resources and funds on the part of the school district. Oftentimes, school district management is left puzzled as to why a desperately needed levy did not pass.

Since knowing what garnered success in the past would be of interest, both academically and practically, many previous studies have explored voter, district, and levy characteristics associated with success and have attempted to identify specific tactics and strategies undertaken by managers that floated successful levies. In general, these studies have concentrated on the levy campaign itself, a time- and effort-intensive activity that typically involves school district personnel and volunteers from within the community and that can last up to a year prior to the actual vote. Few (if any) studies have examined the day-to-day practices not necessarily directly associated with the levy campaign itself that were employed by districts that successfully passed a levy, particularly following one or more failures to pass.

The purpose of this study was to identify the types of consistent efforts undertaken on an ongoing basis (i.e., not practiced only during the levy campaign itself) by districts that floated successful levies following one or more failed ones to, if possible, gauge to what extent these efforts contributed to the levy's passage. Such activities primarily involved the relationship of the school district with its community and so center on communication between school district and community members. Moreover, the

efforts at which this study looked did not consist solely of actions. Motivating actions centered on district-community relations are attitudes of district personnel toward the community and the organizational culture in which these attitudes are embedded. As the creation and fostering of this culture and the actions taken both within and outside the campaign are in the primary control of the school district superintendent, the role played by the school superintendent was a primary focus of this study.

Rationale for Situating the Study in Ohio

Three reasons motivated my selection of the Ohio public school system for this research. First, Ohio is unusual for the sheer frequency with which voters are asked to decide whether or not to approve additional taxation for the purposes of school funding. Fleeter (2007) states, “Ohio utilizes voter approved tax levies to support public schools to a greater extent than any other state in the nation,” noting, that from 1994 to 2006, there were 3,433 local school tax issues on ballots in Ohio.⁷

Also, in contrast to Ohio, other states’ school districts have historically had a high rate of levy passage even with annual increases in property tax rates. For instance, from 2003-2010, New York saw a 91.9 percent passage rate in school district budgets.⁸ On the other hand, from February 1994 to November 2006, Ohio voters approved only 54.6 percent of all operating levies statewide, including renewal levies. New operating levies

⁷ H. Fleeter, *Analysis of Ohio School District Operating Levies from 1994 through 2006* (Columbus, OH: Driscoll & Fleeter, 2007), 1.

⁸ Robert Mark Silverman, “How Unwavering Is Support for the Local Property Tax? Voting on School District Budgets in New York, 2003-2010,” *Journal of Education Finance* 36, no. 3 (2011): 294.

in Ohio, which provide additional funds for schools, passed at an even lower rate of 43 percent.⁹

The second reason that motivated my selection of Ohio as a subject of study was CNN's designation of Ohio as one of the most "representative" states in the United States. Based on key statistics involving race and ethnicity, income and education, and typicality of its neighborhoods, this ranking found Ohio to be one of the top five states that are most like the U.S. as a whole. Thus, it can be viewed as a microcosm of the country as a whole,¹⁰ adding to the generalizability of the study's results.

Third, Ohio is larger than most states and has eight different media markets, making it one of the most diverse U.S. states in this respect. This type of diversity indicates that the state as a whole encompasses many different outlooks on things and many different cultures, unlike a smaller, more homogeneous state such as Vermont. For example, Cleveland and northeast Ohio are far different culturally and politically than Cincinnati and southwest Ohio. People within each media market receive and consume their news and information differently.

Selection of School Districts

This study involved three communities in Ohio—Piqua, Hilliard, and Upper Arlington, all of which, as of this study, had sought increases in taxpayer funding through levies within the ten years preceding the study. Moreover, these districts were selected so

⁹ Fleeter, "Analysis of Ohio School District Operating Levies from 1994 through 2006," 2.

¹⁰ Mark Preston, "The Most 'Representative' State: Wisconsin," *CNN.com*, 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/07/27/mg.thu/>.

as to represent differing characteristics with respect to voter demographics, type of tax request fielded, and school district characteristics.

Aside from having differing characteristics, the selection of these communities was based on three specific criteria. First, all had suffered losses at the ballot box over the five years preceding the successful passage of a levy. Second, each school district had recruited new leadership at the superintendent level following the series of failed levy attempts preceding the success. Third, significant doubt had been expressed within the community as to the credibility of the school district in its operation during the series of failed levies.

The purpose of the study was to identify what the district leadership did to achieve the successful levy following the sequence of failures. By selecting different districts, levies, and community types, I hoped to identify the factors that led to the successful passage. Some factors could be common to all districts, irrespective of situational differences, and so could be useful to a wide array of practitioners. Others could be specific to one particular type of district, tax request, or district structure, and identifying these could also be useful but to district personnel situated within those types of situations.

Since I hypothesized that a key feature of success must rest in a change in the relationship between the district and its voter base, I focused in particular on communication efforts between the district and the public. For instance, among the questions to be addressed were what efforts the district made to improve communications, in both directions, and the resources the district specifically designated to support these efforts.

Structure of Thesis

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the published literature dedicated to passage of school levies and the specific research questions that motivated the study. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present the specific cases to be explored, and Chapter 6 discusses the specific factors identified as leading to success in the cases, both those common to at least two of the cases and those that were unique to one. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis with an assessment of this study's contribution, a discussion of its limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Definition of Terms

Bond levy: A bond levy is a property tax levy used to obtain revenue locally for construction purposes.

Charter schools: Public schools that are given greater freedom than traditional public schools so that they can implement innovations that, it is hoped, will improve the education process. Public charter schools are open to all children, do not charge tuition, and do not have special entrance requirements.¹¹

Communication expenditures (independent variable of the proposed study): Services paid for by traditional public schools that help a school district tell their story, communicate more effectively, and improve their public image.

County financing district levy: A county financing district levy is a property tax levy proposed by an educational service center to support a specific program or purpose

¹¹ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "What Are Public Charter Schools?," 2015, <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/public-charter-schools/>.

(such as special education). If approved, the tax is levied on all participating districts in the county.

Dual-purpose levy: A dual-purpose levy is a single ballot issue for both a permanent improvement (PI) levy or bond issue combined with an operating levy. The issue may be continuing or limited in scope. A PI/operating levy may be either a property tax or a school district income tax, but a bond/operating levy must be a property tax. The school board, at the time it seeks the ballot issue, must state how much of the tax levy will be used for each purpose.

Emergency levy: An emergency levy is a property tax that serves as a limited operating levy (maximum of five years) proposed for a specific dollar amount. Since the dollar amount of taxes charged by the levy must remain constant, the millage rate increases.

General levy: Also known as an operating levy, a general levy is used to provide operating funds.

Incremental levy: Also commonly known as a phase-in levy, an incremental levy is a property tax phased in for the full amount of the millage increase. This is a limited levy with a maximum term of ten years. Unlike an operating levy, an incremental levy imposes additional millage on a regular schedule throughout the life of the levy.¹²

Levy: A local election in Ohio that is used to allow voters to approve or reject a request by the local taxing entity (e.g., public school district, public library, city government).

¹² Ballotpedia, "School Bond and Tax Election in Ohio," *Ballotpedia: The Encyclopedia of American Politics*, 2015, http://ballotpedia.org/School_bond_and_tax_elections_in_Ohio.

Permanent improvement (PI) levy: A levy used for permanent improvements.

Public education reform: Started in the 1990s, education reform seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing system as opposed to revolutionizing, supplanting, or competing with it.¹³ Education reform began by introducing competition for students and tax dollars in the form of non-traditional, “charter” schools. This was in the belief that charters could innovate on how education services were delivered and force competition between schools. The competition between schools would force reforms, streamlining of services, and a higher quality of education. To date, the results have been inconclusive as to whether this has been successful.

Traditional public schools: Schools districts marked by geographical boundaries have long operated public schools serving the communities that fund them. Incorporating the word “traditional” in the names of these public schools differentiates them from the many charter schools that are publicly funded and thus are also “public” schools. Not all charter schools are publicly funded, however.

¹³ Clemmitt, “School Reform,” 395.

Literature Review

Among the literature relevant to my study, Florence's (2014) work on school bond races is the closest to my research in scope, approach, and objectives. Florence emphasizes what school districts that were successful in bond passage have in common: effective communications.¹⁴ Gaining support by voters in a school bond election requires research and understanding of the community and its issues prior to initiation of communication efforts. In particular, communication is instrumental in passage of a construction bond permitting the district to borrow in order to build new school buildings.

The same is true with respect to passage of an operating levy, as demonstrated by Miller (2014), who examined, in detail, a single, successful levy campaign. She provided a detail-rich review of the entire process, including the school district's role in communications or, with respect to the failing levy that immediately preceded the one she explored in depth, the lack thereof. Miller's description of the relationship between the campaign and the school district central office leadership is extremely accurate and detailed. With respect to the levy attempt she explored, Miller points out that, after the preceding levy failure, the central office was replaced by new leadership. This new leadership enabled genuine commitment to be injected into the school district's efforts at communications and community engagement, which allowed the district to be successful in passing the levy on the next attempt.¹⁵ Like Miller, the case studies included in this

¹⁴ Linda L. Florence, "School District Bond Campaigns" (DEd diss., Portland State University, 2014), http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2847&context=open_access_etds, 37-40.

¹⁵ Miller, "Observations from the School Campaign Trail," 159.

research examined the role of a new central office leadership and this leadership's preparation for that levy request.

Ohio-Dominated Studies

As indicated by Ingle, Petroff, and Johnson, Ohio funds its schools through a combination of local property taxes, state aid, and, as also observed by the authors, the frequency with which Ohio voters are asked to approve additional taxes for school funding is unusual.¹⁶ Fleeter states, "Ohio utilizes voter approved tax levies to support public schools to a greater extent than any other state in the nation."¹⁷ Ohio's frequent school levy requests have led to many studies with an Ohio focus.¹⁸

One consequence of Ohio's frequent forays at the ballot box is the extent to which Ohio's public schools lose their focus on education and other matters central to their

¹⁶ William Kyle Ingle, Ruth Ann Petroff, and Paul A. Johnson. "Estimating Resource Costs of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts." *Journal of Education Finance* 37, no. 1 (2011): 52.

¹⁷ Fleeter, "Analysis of Ohio School District Operating Levies from 1994 through 2006," 1.

¹⁸ See Ingle, Petroff, and Johnson, "Estimating Resource Costs of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts," 52; William Driscoll and KnowledgeWorks Foundation, "Property Taxes for Funding Public Education: Ohio's Unique Method for Controlling Tax Increases," 2009, [http://www.driscollandfleeter.com/files/Download/Policy Report on HB 920 Jan 2009.pdf](http://www.driscollandfleeter.com/files/Download/Policy%20Report%20on%20HB%20920%20Jan%202009.pdf), 1; Thomas Galovic, "Educational Referendum Voting in Ohio Based on District Size, Socio-Economic Status, and Median Income" (PhD diss., Indiana State University, 2010), iii; William Kyle Ingle, Paul Andrew Johnson, and Ruth Ann Petroff, "'Hired Guns' and 'legitimate Voices': The Politics and Participants of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 5 (2012): 814, doi:10.1177/0013161X12448251; William Kyle Ingle et al., "Campaign Expenditures in School Levy Referenda and Their Relationship to Voter Approval: Evidence from Ohio, 2007-2010," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 12, no. 1 (2013): 41; Paul A. Johnson and William Kyle Ingle, "Campaign Strategies and Voter Approval of School Referenda: A Mixed Methods Analysis," *Journal of School Public Relations* 30, no. 1 (2009): 51; Miller, "Observations from the School Campaign Trail," 5; Joseph F. Murphy, "A Statistical Analysis of Ohio's Financially Troubled School Districts," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 5, no. 1 (1983): 107; David Shock, "Shifting Tax Burdens: School District Property and Income Tax Referenda in Ohio, 1988-2000" (Miami University, 2002), ii; William Kyle Ingle, "Nothing's Free: Calculating the Cost of Volunteers," *School Business Affairs* 76, no. 9 (2010): 32; Vicki Wheatley, "The Relationship between Components of the Ohio Local School District Report Card and the Outcome of a School Tax Levy" (Ashland University, 2012), iv.

education mission while attempting levy passage. For example, in one of the case studies included in this study, the school superintendent admits to leaving the operation of the district on “auto-pilot” as he/she is engaged in marketing the school district prior to the levy. Ingle, Petroff, et al. (2011) explored in depth this “opportunity cost” incurred by a district when a levy is on the ballot.¹⁹ In the case studies presented in my research, the district superintendents admit to spending massive amounts of both professional man-hours and personal time marketing the school district’s value and campaigning for levy passage. However, Ohio law dictates to what extent school administrators can use district resources to market their schools but not to promote a “yes” vote on a levy.²⁰

With respect to academic performance in Ohio, research has not found a correlation between it and levy passage. Wheatley examined the outcomes of all Ohio school levies included in the general election held on November 8, 2011, and corresponding 2010–2011 local report card items. Wheatley’s results showed no correlation between components of the local school district report cards, school district typologies, and the outcomes of public school district tax levies, leading Wheatley to conclude that a district’s report card was not an adequate predictor of levy success.²¹ However, a study by Johnson and Ingle found that new levies and poverty rates were significantly associated with a decrease in the likelihood of passage.²²

¹⁹ Ingle, Petroff, and Johnson, “Estimating Resource Costs of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts,” 66.

²⁰ Ingle et al., “Campaign Expenditures in School Levy Referenda and Their Relationship to Voter Approval,” 52.

²¹ Wheatley, “The Relationship between Components of the Ohio Local School District Report Card and the Outcome of a School Tax Levy,” 61.

²² Johnson and Ingle, “Campaign Strategies and Voter Approval of School Referenda,” 51.

Factors over Which District Leadership Has No Control

A number of studies have attempted to identify issues that increase likelihood of passage within specific contexts. Such studies have typically employed such quantitative methods as probit analysis, logistic regression, or ordinary least squares regression with either passage/failure (a 0-1 variable) or amount of levy as the dependent variable and various issues as the independent variables. Types of variables investigated were characteristics of the district's voters (e.g., poverty levels, education), district characteristics (e.g., rural/suburban/urban), and levy characteristics (e.g., time of year of vote, position of levy on the ballot).

Among voter characteristics, Bowers, Metzger, and Militello (2010) found percentage of students receiving free lunches and percentage of district population with a high school degree to be negatively and significantly associated with passage in levies held in Michigan from 1998 through 2006.²³ Through exit polls, Bali (2008) identified racially-based incentives, ideology, and self-interest as major determinants of passage in California,²⁴ and some researchers, looked at proportion of aged voters within a district as a determinant of passage.²⁵ Bowers and Lee (2013) found that proportions of Asian and

²³ Bowers, Metzger, and Militello, "Knowing What Matters," 374.

²⁴ Valentina A. Bali, "The Passage of Education Citizen Initiatives: Evidence from California," *Educational Policy* 22, no. 3 (2008): 422.

²⁵ Alex J. Bowers and Jooyoung Lee, "Carried or Defeated?," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 49, no. 5 (2013): 744; M. Gradstein and M. Kaganovich, "Aging Population and Education Finance Reform," *Journal of Public Economics* 88, no. 12 (2004): 2469; Helen F. Ladd and Sheila E. Murray, "Intergenerational Conflict Reconsidered: County Demographic Structure and the Demand for Public Education," *Economics of Education Review* 20 (2001): 343.

Hispanic households within Texas districts' populations were positively associated with passage.²⁶

Among characteristics of the levy itself that were found to affect likelihood of passage, Bowers et al. (2010) identified distance of levy from the top of the ballot and bond amount (i.e., the higher the amount, the lower the likelihood of passage) as being negatively and significantly important to passage whereas lateness in calendar year of the levy vote was positively and significantly associated with passage.²⁷ Bowers and Lee (2013) found that Texas levies attempted from 1997 through 2009 were more likely to pass on their first attempts than on their second or third ones.²⁸ Johnson and Ingle (2009) found that renewal levies were much more likely to pass than new ones.²⁹

Among district characteristics examined was amount of long-term debt.³⁰ Dean (1972) found that successful Kansas districts received relatively more state aid and were smaller than unsuccessful ones.³¹ Silverman (2011) found that size of district population was positively associated with passage in New York but that size of minority populations mitigated this.³² Johnson and Ingle (2009) observed that, "as a district's reliance on

²⁶ Alex J. Bowers and Jooyoung Lee, "Carried or Defeated?," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 49, no. 5 (2013): 733.

²⁷ Bowers, Metzger, and Militello, "Knowing What Matters," 374.

²⁸ Bowers and Lee, "Carried or Defeated?," 732.

²⁹ Johnson and Ingle, "Campaign Strategies and Voter Approval of School Referenda: A Mixed Methods Analysis," 57.

³⁰ Bowers, Metzger, and Militello, "Knowing What Matters," 374.

³¹ Conrad Dean, "Quantitative Factors Related to the Passage of Kansas School Bond Issues: 1966 to 1971" (Kansas State University, 1972), 36.

commercial and industrial property tax increased (as opposed to agricultural and residential), so did the likelihood of levy passage.”³³

Several studies have attempted to create typologies or sets of commonly occurring characteristics that are associated with successful strategies or likelihood of passage.³⁴ Johnson and Ingle (2009) found urban or suburban districts with high median incomes and low poverty rates to be significantly less likely to pass a levy than rural districts with low median incomes and high poverty rates.³⁵ However, Wheatley (2012) found no correlation between district report card data, district typology, and likelihood of passage in Ohio.³⁶

Purpose of the levy has also been found to be influential. In contrast to demographic characteristics of voters, Shock (2002) found characteristics of the levy itself to be an extremely significant determinant in likelihood of passage. Specifically, the levy type, duration, and size were important determinants of passage or failure to pass in that they matched, or failed to match, respectively, voters’ rational self-interest.³⁷ Bowers and Lee (2013) found that bond issues for debt re-financing and renovations were

³² Silverman, “How Unwavering Is Support for the Local Property Tax?,” 294.

³³ Johnson and Ingle, “Campaign Strategies and Voter Approval of School Referenda,” 57.

³⁴ Ibid.; Corliss Lentz, “Predicting School Referenda Outcomes: Answers from Illinois,” *Journal of Education Finance* 24, no. 4 (1999): 459; Timothy Ryan, “An Examination of Community Type and School Tax Levy Referenda in Missouri” (Saint Louis University, 2005), 1.

³⁵ Johnson and Ingle, “Campaign Strategies and Voter Approval of School Referenda,” 59.

³⁶ Wheatley, “The Relationship between Components of the Ohio Local School District Report Card and the Outcome of a School Tax Levy,” 61.

³⁷ David Shock, “Shifting Tax Burdens: School District Property and Income Tax Referenda in Ohio, 1988-2000” (Miami University, 2002), 214.

more likely to pass than ones to support, for instance, athletics.³⁸ Zimmer, Buddin, Jones, and Liu (2011) found that bond issues to support maintenance or repair of existing structures were more likely to pass than those designed to fund new construction. Moreover, issues related to “core” purposes had a higher likelihood of passage than those to fund, for instance, parking lots.³⁹

Although the issues above have been shown within certain contexts to affect likelihood of passage, Galovic (2010), in a study based in Ohio and Indiana, employed somewhat different statistical techniques (discriminant analysis and ANOVA) to determine that district size, per capita income, and poverty levels were not the most significant factors in passage. Rather, Galovic (2010) asserted, “[T]he value their communities place on education is the deciding factor in regards to passing a referendum and much effort must be placed into the process of preparing the district to undertake a referendum.”⁴⁰

Factors over Which District Leadership Has Control

In “Ten Commandments of Successful School Levies” by Carter and Devries (1967), the authors’ second commandment emphasizes the importance of school districts’

³⁸ Bowers and Lee, “Carried or Defeated?”, 756.

³⁹ Ron Zimmer et al., “What Types of School Capital Projects Are Voters Willing to Support?,” *Public Financial* 31, no. 1 (2011): 37–55, doi:10.1111/j.1540-5850.2011.00973.x, 55.

⁴⁰ Thomas Galovic, “Educational Referendum Voting in Ohio Based on District Size, Socio-Economic Status, and Median Income” (PhD diss., Indiana State University, 2010), 56.

recruiting citizen champions to advocate for levy passage.⁴¹ In all of the case studies in this research, we found the recruitment of citizen champions critical in passage. Ingle et al. (2012), who performed a comparative study of five Ohio districts, reiterate and reinforce this belief: “the biggest difference between districts that had levies approved and those that did not were the extent to which the campaigns engaged community members.”⁴² For the districts that successfully floated levies, district personnel “sought the input and energies of community stakeholders, including students.” Those with unsuccessful campaigns ran what the authors term “central office campaigns” and practiced limited engagement with stakeholders.⁴³

Carter and Devries (1967) included still another strategy over which a district superintendent has control in their tenth commandment, which states, “Once the Issue Passes, Don’t Forget the Public.”⁴⁴ All of the case studies researched here illustrate how not only do successful school districts work to communicate before a levy is even requested but how the conversation continues after the levy has passed.

Marketing is a crucial goal of communications. Securing passage of school levies is not the only reason why traditional public schools need to communicate and market themselves; thanks to education reform there is increased competition for students from charter schools. As Clemmitt (2011) states, this issue is increasingly contentious, as

⁴¹ Carter and Devries, “Ten Commandments of Successful School Tax Campaigns,” 210.

⁴² Ingle, Johnson, and Petroff, “‘Hired Guns’ and ‘legitimate Voices’: The Politics and Participants of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts,” 836.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Carter and Devries, “Ten Commandments of Successful School Tax Campaigns,” 212.

teacher evaluations are merit based on student test scores. Clemmitt (2011) further states that, although only a few charter schools have merit, the expansion of charter schools continues and thus so does the competition for students.⁴⁵ However, expansion alone does not guarantee students, as communicated in the well-known comment by Porterfield and Carnes (2008): “You can’t market a poor product. No amount of marketing will help. Sooner or later, everyone recognizes lipstick on a pig.”⁴⁶ Florence (2014) recommends that a district “assess its public image” and deploy the feedback obtained “tactically” to as to “create a stronger plan.”⁴⁷

Although good communications cannot compensate for a poorly run school district, good communication and community engagement can certainly help pass a levy. Ingle, Petroff, et al. (2011), in their five-district comparison, differentiate between districts that “authentically and strategically” engage community members and “central office campaigns” in which community member partnership is “largely ceremonial.”⁴⁸ Newmark (1982) supports the importance of an engaged citizenry in a study of the 1980 levy passage of Clayton School District in Missouri. During this campaign, district workers sought to engage voters on a city block by city block basis and so managed to get nearly 30 percent of registered voters to the polls.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Clemmitt, “School Reform,” 396.

⁴⁶ K. Porterfield and M. Carnes, *Why School Communication Matters: Strategies from PR Professionals* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2008), 102.

⁴⁷ Florence, “School District Bond Campaigns,” 61.

⁴⁸ Ingle, Petroff, and Johnson, “Estimating Resource Costs of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts,” 12.

⁴⁹ Barbara D. Newmark, “A School District Decides: A Successful Campaign Strategy,” *Phi Delta Kappan International* 64, no. 3 (1982): 203.

Research Questions

As the number and intensity of school levy campaigns has grown, so has the research literature exploring them. Most of these studies, however, have been quantitative analyses of pre-existing data or of completed voter surveys. Unlike those quantitative studies, this study's focus was on the actions of the school district's superintendent, and the primary research technique used, the qualitative interview, belongs to the participant-observation method of data gathering.⁵⁰

As this research study sought to understand the inner workings of school district communication efforts (both those preceding the start of the campaign and those during the campaign itself), its primary aim was to identify and better understand contributory causes to levy passage and failure. Two secondary aims were procedural in nature. The first was to test the usefulness of the case study approach in school levy studies, an underdeveloped technique in this area. The second was as a response to the call in prior published studies in the levy literature for more qualitative research in future studies of levy campaigns.⁵¹ Among those answering this call was Miller (2014), who commented upon the novel nature of a qualitative approach in the area and employed it in her research.⁵²

⁵⁰ Miller, "Observations from the School Campaign Trail," 13.

⁵¹ Johnson and Ingle, "Campaign Strategies and Voter Approval of School Referenda," 65; Ingle, Johnson, and Petroff, "'Hired Guns' and 'legitimate Voices': The Politics and Participants of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts," 851-852.

⁵² Miller, "Observations from the School Campaign Trail," 14.

Because the school district's relationship with its community is a key factor in levy passage, communication is a primary focus of this study. To determine what particular communication strategies led to a successful passage after a history of failure, this study sought to understand the inner workings of pre- and during-levy-campaign district communication—both external, i.e., two-way, with the community and internal to the district itself. In this manner, this research will, it is hoped, lead to a better understanding of the factors under the control of a district's management that lead to levy passage or failure.

The central role of communication to this study's topic governed the primary research question the study was designed to address:

- *Do a school district's ongoing, pro-active two-way communication efforts with its community, both during a levy campaign and prior to its beginning, increase likelihood of the levy's passage?*

The school district's superintendent obviously occupies a critical role in levy passage, leading to the following question concerning extent and scope of this figure's influence on efforts to obtain passage:

- *What is the role of district leadership in creating and fostering a culture that values ongoing, pro-active two-way communication with the community?*

Although their role is critical, Florence (2014) observes that superintendents are generally unprepared for leading a bond campaign and must learn how to do so through trial and error,⁵³ thus leading to the following question:

- *Does Ohio's high frequency of levies force superintendents there to do things outside their comfort zones?*

⁵³ Florence, "School District Bond Campaigns," 25.

Finally, it has been noted that “there are two types of school districts in Ohio: those that are on the ballot and those that will be”.⁵⁴ Thus, a final question to be addressed was the following:

- *How does the school district determine that it needs to commit limited resources—both formal and informal—to pro-active communication efforts?*

⁵⁴ Ingle, Petroff, and Johnson, “Estimating Resource Costs of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts,” 69)

Case Study 1: Piqua, Ohio

The first case to be presented involves Piqua City Schools (Piqua, Ohio), a public-school district that had difficulty obtaining support for local property tax levy increases to support future revenue shortfalls. According to a poll conducted in 2007, residents were not convinced that the school district had been a good steward of the public tax dollar. Compounding local distrust was that, by 2007, the district's schools were designed to accommodate more students than were currently enrolled. Attempting to place a tax increase on the ballot while the district served fewer students failed each time it was attempted.

This trend had continued for decades. Regardless of the levy's purpose (e.g., current operating expenses or new construction), tax levies failed to pass many times before voters, apparently worn down by so many requests, finally passed levies smaller than the original request. For instance, when the Piqua district sought to build a new high school in the 1960s, ten attempts at the ballot were required to pass the bond levy that eventually enabled its construction.

This pattern of repeated ballot failure came to a head in 2007 with multiple failures to pass an increase in property taxes and then in income taxes to bolster the school district's budget. The issue of a property tax was brought before the voters twice and of an income tax once in 2007, and each time the public voted a resounding no to a tax increase to support the school district.

The inability to secure new funding led to still another problem; the leadership of the Piqua City Schools felt that the inability to obtain new funding compromised the quality of the education they could provide. To address this problem, in 2007 the Piqua

City School Board brought in new leadership and hired a new school district superintendent: Richard Hanes of Tipp City School in Ohio. After accepting the new job, Superintendent Hanes quickly realized that this problem had grown into a major bone of contention within the larger Piqua community. The community, according to Superintendent Hanes, wanted this issue addressed before it approved new taxes.⁵⁵ Thus, the situation was a catch-22, with the public demanding up-to-date facilities and capabilities for the district's students, while being unwilling to invest more money until it was convinced the district would deliver on its promises.

After being hired immediately following two ballot failures and experiencing two other failures after he became superintendent, Hanes modified Piqua City Schools' approach to obtaining passage. In particular, he invested both fiscal resources and staff time into proactively and directly communicating with and marketing his schools to the community. Deciding to no longer leave the task of explaining the school district's situation to the levy campaign committee, Hanes and his staff employed not only the tools used in previous attempts at passage but sought new ones to communicate the district's needs to Piqua's taxpayers.

This case study will explore the means and strategies Piqua City Schools employed to communicate with and proactively market itself to the local community. In doing so, it changed public perception of the district and reversed its fortunes at the ballot box.

Piqua is a rural city in western Ohio located 28 miles north of Dayton, Ohio. In general, Piqua is, and was at the time being discussed, a blue-collar, economically diverse

⁵⁵ Rick Hanes, "Personal Communication (12/01/16)."

community, with some industry and agriculture. As now, agriculture constituted 25% of the city's GDP and the two factories in the city were the area's two largest employers, with Piqua City Schools the third largest employer. In summary, the local community was made up of many smaller, locally owned businesses, some industry, and a few families that were "old money."

Piqua's population, which has remained at 20,000 since 1960, had not seen any significant growth in the past 60 years. Although Piqua's population numbers had remained steady for decades, its population had grown older, meaning that, at the time during which it sought passage of the levy, the number of students attending Piqua's schools were fewer than in previous years. As a consequence, the district's schools could accommodate more students than were then enrolled, another factor that served to increase public resistance to passage of new levies.

In 2007, Hanes felt that the district needed to show the community that it could adjust to the new reality of fewer students while at the same time offering solid fiscal management. Prior to 2007, resistance to change among internal school district staff had allowed the district to avoid adjustments needed to make this transition. The school district was the city's third largest employer, and previous administrations had viewed letting staff go from good-paying positions as an unpopular move within the community. Thus, though described by Superintendent Hanes as a "generous community that supports its local educational institutions," the community as a whole remained very skeptical that new levy taxes were needed.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Ibid,

The community had to be shown on a consistent basis that the need for new taxes was real and that these new taxes would not serve to simply feed a bloated school district incapable of making the hard decisions needed to provide the twenty-first century education that the community wanted. In many cases, community perception of a school district does not mean it is reality. In Piqua's case, however, it was. After reviewing the district's budget, Superintendent Hanes found he concurred with public perception: the district's budget was large for a school district of its size—in other words, bloated—and reductions needed to be made.

In 2007, Hanes set out to correct this situation. The tasks he faced were the following: One, reduce the budget to align with the district's reduced enrollment while convincing the community that this new budget was realistic. Second, make the staff and program changes needed to deal with the shrinking enrollment. Third, communicate and market what Piqua City Schools was doing and the fact that it was listening and acting upon the wishes of the Piqua community.

In addressing these challenges, Hanes faced three options. The first was to maintain the status quo in Piqua City Schools' operation and hope that the community, most of whom were of a conservative bent, would be content with the lack of change. This had some appeal as it would be popular with Piqua City Schools staff. Change is a challenge to any organization and, in a school district that had been using the same techniques, both in levy campaigns and in general operations, for decades, there was great appeal in some quarters in simply maintaining the status quo—tweaking the budget slightly and continuing to ask voters to pass a new levy until they finally capitulated and voted yes.

However, this approach damaged the credibility of the people who had been working on the levy campaign, asking for new tax dollars, and who were dedicated to explaining the school district's needs to the public. Moreover, this status quo option did not address Piqua's critical needs of providing what Hanes defined as "a quality twenty-first-century public education." Repeated failure at the ballot box meant that these needs could not be addressed and that Piqua City Schools was not listening to the concerns of the larger Piqua community, which indicated a need for change. Each tax levy on the ballot represented a decrease in the credibility of Piqua City Schools in the eyes of the community, which wanted to see spending control and appropriate infrastructure changes to accommodate the new student population.

Superintendent Hanes's second option was to attempt to address the community's desire for a twenty-first century education for its children but leave staff re-education/financial belt tightening alone. According to Superintendent Hanes, this had real appeal, and he strongly considered pursuing this solution. This route would have also made Piqua City Schools staff happy and so would not have impacted morale. It also would have chipped away at the majority block of voters who had consistently rejected the district's appeal for new levy taxes in previous years.

However, the place and time were not favorable to this approach. In 2007, the economy was in free fall, and the people of Piqua were deeply impacted by the recession. Piqua, a blue-collar town, was hit harder by the economic downturn than many other communities in southwest Ohio. Hanes commented, "If I was in a more traditional bedroom community, I might have chosen this option. But as much as the people of

Piqua support their schools, they also have to eat.”⁵⁷ Thus, asking for new money without making significant reductions to the Piqua City Schools budget was a political non-starter.

Superintendent Hanes’ third option, and the only realistic approach through which to succeed at the voting booth, was to address the fiscal and educational sides of the issue simultaneously. This approach would entail Piqua City School staff members assuming the responsibility for promoting the levy campaign rather than an external campaign committee. Since many of these same staff members lived and voted inside the City of Piqua, this approach would make at least some of the people inside the district unhappy. Thus, in this option, he would be relying on possibly unhappy staff members to aggressively communicate and market through word of mouth a plan that would, he hoped, restore fiscal credibility to the district but that would involve sacrifices on the part of these same staff members.

No previous Piqua City Schools superintendent had ever attempted to address both the district’s fiscal and educational concerns simultaneously. Thus, this option represented unexplored territory, especially in its communication and marketing to the Piqua community. For this effort to be successful, Hanes would have to increase Piqua City Schools communication and marketing efforts to a level many times higher than previously.

Hanes chose this option, which involved investing significant time and resources and involved employing new communication and marketing tools that the district had never before used. These tools were as follows:

⁵⁷ Ibid.

-Professional polling: If Piqua City Schools had any hope of raising the level of dialogue in its communication and marketing efforts, it needed to greatly improve its capability of listening to the Piqua community and what it wanted. Thus, Piqua City Schools employed polling to determine the community's views of the school district, both fiscally and educationally. Since the school district had been unable to convince a majority of community members to support new levies, this scientific poll went out to all stakeholders in the community. The survey was designed to allow community members to tell Piqua City Schools the type of information they wanted the school district to provide them. This knowledge would allow the district's staff to craft messages rich with information the community said it wanted.

-Focus Groups: In the spirit of becoming better listeners to the Piqua community, Hanes implemented focus groups to enable him and his staff to understand qualitatively where the disconnect with the public was occurring. A dozen individuals from the community were gathered and asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school district's communication efforts. In this way, Hanes and his staff were able to identify what communication vehicles were needed for each group of stakeholders and what message was to be communicated to each group to which the district was marketing.

-Communications Consultants: The Piqua City Schools staff understood that their expertise was in education, not communications and marketing. Thus, a communication firm was hired to help with messaging. This firm was extremely successful in helping the staff refine and invent new communication vehicles for different groups within the Piqua community.

-Formation of the Superintendent Advisory Committee: Realizing that word-of-mouth marketing was still one of the most effective and cheapest forms of marketing, Hanes invited a group of citizen leaders (both parents and non-parents) to advise and inform him of happenings within the Piqua community. Not only did this put Hanes in direct communication with community leaders, but it also allowed him to directly communicate to community leaders changes he was making to the fiscal and educational aspects of the school district.

-Principal Advisory Committees: Realizing that he could not be the only one on his staff communicating and marketing to their community, he empowered the principals of each school inside the district to form their own committees with the same communication and marketing goals as his own.

-Student Advisory Committees: Similarly, he enlisted students in the task of communicating and marketing Piqua City Schools initiatives to the public.

-Community Newsletter: Hanes had a newsletter called “The Drumbeat” sent out quarterly. In this era of instant communication, school districts have moved away from this costly way of communicating with the public. However, many technologies now current were not yet in existence, and the Piqua community had a significant elderly population not as connected to the web as younger citizens. Thus, newsletters were an effective way of reaching people who did not have any children attending district schools and who would therefore most likely not be proactive in seeking out school information on the fiscal and educational changes occurring there. Also, included in the newsletter were solicitations for feedback, and these informal surveys constituted still another

method for gathering data on community perceptions and so allowed the staff to continuously refine its message.

Staff Involvement: According to Superintendent Hanes, while most public-school superintendents typically spend 20 to 30 percent of their time communicating and marketing to their communities, Hanes began spending all of his time communicating and marketing to the Piqua citizens. Every action he personally vetted with his staff and consultants so as to remain true to the fiscal and educational commitments the school district had made to its stakeholders. Consistency in decision making and in communicating decisions to the public was the goal, both for Hanes and for Piqua City Schools staff members, who were committing more than 15 percent of their time communicating and marketing to the greater Piqua community. According to Superintendent Hanes, the normal level of time allocated to these activities within a school district was under 10 percent, if any at all. Scientific polling showed that Piqua's teachers were highly regarded and were considered highly credible communicators. To enlist Piqua's teachers in his efforts and have them proactively communicate with the greater Piqua community was critical in any communication and marketing efforts.

With these tools, Piqua City Schools engaged the Piqua community as it had never before been engaged. Scientific polling confirmed that the community was happy with the direction Superintendent Hanes was taking the district educationally, but less than half the people polled felt that Piqua was doing a good job with its finances.

For consistency in messaging and per the communication consultant's suggestion, Piqua City Schools created a "Taxpayer's Bill of Rights" that outlined what the Piqua taxpayer should expect from the school district. The document was intended to foster an

honest and transparent relationship with the Piqua community, and it proved to be highly effective. It was published in a newsletter, discussed during sessions with advisory groups, and referenced in every communication Piqua City Schools sent out, reinforcing the idea that the district and its staff were serious about being good stewards of the Piqua tax dollar. Using the “Taxpayer Bill of Rights,” Piqua City Schools communicated that the district was being frugal with Piqua tax dollars in both large and small ways.

School districts frequently mention major cost-saving reductions, since these are guaranteed to garner public attention. In Piqua, however, reinforcing the perception that the district’s staff was actively seeking to be frugal was critical. Therefore, when the district adopted the cost-saving practice of turning down heat in non-essential areas to save money on heating costs during winter, parents were notified to dress children appropriately. This type of transparency had an effect and served to increase Piqua Schools credibility in keeping its promises on reductions in spending by eliminating waste and redundancies where discovered.

These promises included those of the Piqua Board of Education also, which was held to its promises with respect to finances. It was not allowed to go back on previous statements as do most public school boards of education when money is “found” through administrative money shuffling to save a school program that was to be cut due to lack of funding. Although Piqua City Schools staff now had the mindset “We did it and then we communicated about it,” the true test of the new approach’s effectiveness would be shown during the next election, in public support for the next levy.

Two months before Piqua City Schools was to appear on the ballot, the practice of sending letters home to parents via students every Friday was begun. These letters, called

the “Backpack Express,” informed parents that Piqua City Schools would once again be placing a levy on the upcoming ballot to obtain new operating funds. Piqua City Schools had failed four times prior to the upcoming request.

At that time, the most common form of school revenue was through increased local property taxes levied on homeowners, and the least common was an income tax, which falls on all citizens, including seniors on fixed incomes. According to research by Piqua City Schools, many Piqua voters were upset by the prospect of an increase in income taxes, which would be collected on all fixed income, including seniors, who tended to be very reliable voters and so would make their point of view felt at the ballot box. However, other Piqua taxpayers indicated that they wanted the tax burden to be shared evenly, including by seniors on fixed incomes, and this view won out.

In the spring of 2008, the investment the district had made in communication and marketing and its improved operations paid off for Piqua City Schools with passage of the first school income tax, winning with 56 percent of the vote. Piqua continued to invest in communication and marketing and was again successful in 2011, with 59 percent voting for passage of a bond issue to rebuild many of the district’s older buildings, including one that had been built in 1920. The passage of this issue on its first trial was a significant barometer of public support. In contrast, in the 1960s ten attempts at the ballot were required to pass a much-needed levy to fund a Piqua high school.

In conclusion, this case study suggests that investment of resources in communication and marketing by a public school district can lead to increased community support. Through its communication with the community, district personnel learned that Piqua voters associated “excellent” with “expensive,” an equivalence the

district did not want. Instead, the district discovered, Piqua's voters wanted a school district that provided the community's children with a solid education but that also operated frugally. The district responded, trimming the fat from its operations, and communicated that it had heard its community and was complying with its wishes when it adopted a new slogan, "Good Schools, Good Value." That this slogan was more than just an advertising gimmick was communicated when Ohio awarded Piqua City Schools an "excellent" ranking in its evaluation of the state's school districts. The "Taxpayer's Bill of Rights," another communication from the district to its community, educated the community as to what it should expect from its district. Thus, two-way communication efforts enabled Piqua to discover what its community expected from its school district, including where the district was falling short, and enabled Piqua to communicate its actions in support of the community's wishes.

Case Study 2: Hilliard, Ohio

The next case study deals with the Hilliard City School District located in Hilliard, Ohio, which had been unable to generate sufficient community support to pass a tax levy on a first attempt in decades. Challenges the district faced were the perception that taxes were already too high and the district's social-economic and geographic diversity.

The Hilliard City School District is currently the ninth largest school district in the state of Ohio,⁵⁸ and this is reflected in its makeup, which has not changed significantly from the time this case study covers. Diverse urban families on the west side of Columbus, the suburban bedroom community of Hilliard, and rural Brown Township illustrate the wide differences present in Hilliard City School District's geography. Another challenge was that voters in the community, who tended to be fiscally conservative, were conditioned to vote "no" the first time a levy was offered up for a vote in hopes that waiting would provoke cost-cutting or a reduction in the tax the Hilliard City School District would propose in response to being defeated.

The final challenge to the Hilliard City School District was the new leadership it had in its superintendent position. In 2013, a new superintendent, Dr. John Marschhausen, was appointed from outside the district to replace the previous superintendent, who had occupied the position for fifteen years and had worked in the district as the assistant superintendent for two years prior to becoming superintendent.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ "John Marschhausen," *District Administration Leadership Institute*, 2017, <https://www.daleadershipinstitute.com/content/john-marschhausen>.

⁵⁹ John Marschhausen, "Personal Communication (12/06/16)," 2016.

Dr. Marschhausen, who as of the time of this writing is still Superintendent of Hilliard City School District, was even then a dynamic educational leader. Having served previously in the Loveland City Schools (2010-2013) and in the East Knox Local School District (2005-2010), he was experienced when he took over Hilliard in 2013 but had no experience in the district itself.

Making communications the priority in the first year of his term, Dr. Marschhausen engaged the community both personally and electronically. He immediately became very active with his blog, had an active social media presence, and held monthly “coffee with the superintendent.” Dr. Marschhausen was committed to building his personal brand in the school district so that people would get to know him and so that he would not be “one of those leaders that sat behind his desk all day.” He made himself accessible, was personable, and communicated on a continual basis with his community. His aim was that, when he attempted to “sell” a levy to community members, people would trust him because they felt that they knew and could trust him.

At the start of his term, Dr. Marschhausen needed to learn the institutional and political landscape of Hilliard District. In doing so, the most significant problem he identified was the district’s inability to reach community members who did not typically come into contact with the school district and so did not communicate with it. As these community members would also be voting on educational levies, he needed to reach them also. Dr. Marschhausen puts it this way:

I think in schools we would all say we over-communicate, we yell ‘everybody knows we do a great job,’ but there is a certain percentage in all our school districts, people that we’re not getting the message to. And there comes a point where, when you have a great message, you still have to communicate your great

message and it's hard to get that out to people who just don't necessarily want to listen. And that I think is our biggest challenge.⁶⁰

Failing to connect with people not directly involved with the schools or with Hilliard City School District itself had led to many of its past ballot failures and thus represented a significant problem for the new superintendent.

Still another set of challenges faced Dr. Marschhausen in attempting to get the upcoming levy passed on its first attempt. The Hilliard City School District had some of the highest tax rates in the state of Ohio. For a school district that tended to be fiscally conservative, persuading the Hilliard District's community to vote yes to the upcoming levy was therefore an even greater challenge. As Dr. Marschhausen described it:

We were over reliant on our property taxes. We have one of the highest tax rates for municipal areas, I think probably in the country, but definitely in Ohio, and we keep coming back to the well because of the structure of Ohio school funding. We have to come back every so often because our revenue doesn't grow with inflation. And the challenge of having a new message while you continue to ask for more money, that's hard with people when only 30% of the people in your district have kids in the school.⁶¹

This reliance on property taxes to fund its operations was an issue and one that the district could do little about since Ohio determined how public school funding worked, making his options limited. This case study will look at how Hilliard City School District significantly increased its communication and marketing efforts in its attempt to make history at the ballot box and win a tax levy increase on its first attempt. Like many Ohio suburban school districts, Hilliard was on a levy cycle that required it to go back to its community to ask for additional funds every four years.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

In 2010, under the previous superintendent, the district followed its usual pattern and hired a communications firm to help with a March 2011 levy campaign. The strategy was to focus on parents only in the face of expected low voter turnout. So, while communication did increase during the levy cycle, it was only increased to parents. The strategy did not work, and the 2011 levy failed 56 percent to 44 percent.

The leadership team at the time, upon performing a post analysis of the effort, decided to bring in a new communications consulting company and a new polling company that specialized in schools. In August 2011, the polling company performed a survey among the district's registered voters, thus giving the district and the new communications consulting company a clearer picture as to what the community thought of the district.

First, a surprisingly large number of people openly volunteered that they had moved to the community because of the schools (34 percent) and another incredibly high percentage of both parents and non-parents (87 percent) awarded the quality of the school district an incredibly high rating. Clearly the voters had a high opinion of the schools; so why had they not supported the ballot issue?

The poll helped answer this question. It also showed a strong nonpositive sentiment related to the district's finances and a belief that the proposed "cuts" that the board of education had approved were just threats. Among parents, 60 percent pointed to specific financial concerns within the district, and 37 percent felt financial cuts were needed. Among all residents, only 38.5 percent felt the district was doing a good job of managing its funds effectively and efficiently.

Based upon the advice of the new communications consulting company, the Hilliard City School District enhanced its communication tools and messages. They focused on the need to maintain the current level of quality in education but also retain the recent spending reductions that teachers had agreed upon during recent contract re-negotiations following the spring levy loss. Teachers became more involved in the campaign, and the district engaged the entire community, with extra effort spent on parents of children attending the district's schools. The millage request was reduced and the district repeatedly used the theme of "we listened and are tightening our belt." The November 2011 election resulted in a close win, with the final vote 15,214 *For* to 15,004 *Against*, or 50.35 percent to 49.65 percent. Thus, the revised levy passed by just 210 votes, requiring a re-count before the final results could be certified.

The Hilliard City School District had won one battle, but the war of garnering voter support for the district in advance of a levy request was far from over. The district's leadership team decided to retain the services of the new communications consulting firm. This was a break from tradition and represented an important shift in the methodology they had used in the past to engage their community. In the past, once a ballot issue was successful, the district and consultants went their separate ways, and the contract ended. Instead, the district's leadership opted to continue the consultant support, seeking to engage parents and community concerning the district's financial situation. Steps taken to do so included quarterly newsletters sent out to community members that focused on district finances, school newsletters, and messages from the principals focused on district-related themes, particularly their finances. In addition, the district treasurer presented regular updates to the community. In other words, the district

leadership continued many of the same strategies and efforts that it had used during the successful, Fall 2011 levy campaign but outside a levy campaign.

In August 2013, two years after the August 2011 survey, the district completed another community survey using the same polling company as in 2011 and included some of the same questions as had been on this previous survey. The district's financial rating amongst all voters had increased by eight percentage points; 45.2 percent total responded positively when asked if they believed the school district was spending its money in an effective and efficient manner. By October 2014, the district's positive financial rating had strengthened to 54.6 percent. The district had turned the tide and re-positioned itself amongst the community regarding its overall financial management practices. While there was certainly work to still be done when voters were asked to allocate additional tax dollars for the school district, the district had successfully increased its communications efforts and set itself up for a better conversation with the community when the next levy would be needed.

Discussion for floating the next levy began in 2015. Now under the leadership of Dr. Marschhausen, the Hilliard City School District weighed its options: do they go now and risk the same fate as on past levy requests (fail, make cuts and eventually pass after reductions in programs and staff) or figure out a way to extend the levy cycle, i.e., postpone requests for additional funds till a later date? By reducing spending, the district did not put a levy request on the 2015 ballot but instead pushed it back till at least 2016, and this fiscal stewardship earned it congratulations from the community. Two primary factors enabled the district to extend the levy. First, staff negotiations on the contract to

create better health care conditions had ended favorably, and second the state budget was a little more kind than originally projected.

In 2016, however, Hilliard District would have to reduce spending by cutting programs or staff if it pushed its next levy request back for still another year, to 2017. But this reduction in spending would almost certainly impact staff morale, which could in turn negatively impact communication and marketing efforts. Another factor that made floating the levy in 2016 advantageous was the presidential election; typically turnout peaked during a presidential election year, and turnout was extremely important in a school district the size of Hilliard City School District.

Finally, communication and marketing were challenging enough at the best of times, but getting people excited enough to vote in an off-year election could be time consuming and costly. Delaying the tax levy request from 2015 to 2016 had had a positive impact, but delaying it from 2016 to 2017 would have a very negative one. As Dr. Marschhausen describes it:

We looked at cuts; [addressing the researcher] we listened to our consultants such as you. One of the huge benefits that we had was when you said, ‘Can you wait another year?’ We do better when lots of people show up, so knowing that pushing it to ’16 and when you win you can’t think that you have a huge windfall of money. So, you’ve got to be able to continue to live within your means even when you win. So, that’s big. So, that’s what we did.⁶²

Aside from timing, another alternative for the Hilliard District was to place an income tax rather than a traditional property tax on the ballot. As mentioned previously, Hilliard District contained some agricultural land, and farmers tend to be land rich and cash poor. However, the overwhelming majority of residents were the opposite, and

⁶² Ibid.

Hilliard housing stock was, and still is, one of the better values in the Columbus area. In professional focus groups conducted beforehand, the idea of an income tax rather than a property tax was tested in these groups. It quickly became clear that an income tax would be very unpopular.

With time and form decided, Hilliard enlisted the same communications consulting company to assist them in designing a communication strategy, including timing (when), communications media (how), and targets of its communication messages (who). Hilliard then hired Fallon Research to conduct survey research to map out Hilliard's opinion environment, and survey results showed that, based on their current attitudes and knowledge, Hilliard voters would vote against the levy 49 percent to 43 percent. However, when certain factors (i.e., growth, new construction, and, most importantly, preservation of the schools' educational quality) were at stake, the poll flipped in favor of the levy 52 percent to 42 percent.

Additional focus groups were conducted, and, through these, it was discovered that people were sensitive to the growth of the community and of the school district. A few months later, group members stated flatly that they would like to slow down their community's growth and would support the amendment designed to accomplish this that was scheduled to be on the ballot that coming spring. The City of Hilliard was making zoning decisions to fast track construction of apartment complexes. Included on the ballot was a referendum that prohibited the city government from using emergency action in such zoning decisions. Although the referendum did not actually limit growth, it forced the city to give the citizenry time to realize what was happening and voice their concerns with respect to such zoning decisions. The high-quality research that uncovered attitudes

toward growth better positioned the school district to act and sensitized it to the political climate, enabling it to use this climate to its advantage.

In possession of this data, the message that Hilliard District's leadership needed to communicate to the community, the 'what,' was simple and powerful—preserving the quality of education in Hilliard District's schools. As Dr. Marschhausen explained:

It's the message. It's the message. It's finding a message that resonates and it's simple. And I think unless your message is clear you're going to struggle because you have to believe in it and your team has to believe in it and we can argue about how we fund schools in Ohio. You can argue about the taxes are too high. The facts in the message were inarguable. And it was easy to tell our staff if someone starts arguing with you that teacher's get paid too much, doesn't argue. We never had to argue thoughts. We never had to argue opinions because all we had to do was talk the facts. And if someone else wanted to get into thoughts and opinions we said, "Thank you very much. You're entitled to those thoughts and opinions. We just want to share with you the facts of this levy." It was that simple. The folks who said no, the heartbreaking stories that I hear from senior citizens who feel like they are going to sell their homes, they're not arguing that our schools aren't good. You know the other thing is that we've got a good product. So, if you've got a good message and a good product you're not selling, you're explaining. And you've probably worked, at other districts you might have to sell. But we weren't selling, we were explaining.⁶³

To communicate this message, Hilliard District distributed newsletters to the community, carrying the message that a levy increase was needed to preserve quality of education. In addition, to make sure that people across the spectrum knew what was at stake and why their taxes were as high as they were, district personnel created a financial prospectus for Hilliard City School District. This eight-page document described the school district's financial health, listed the costs it incurred in providing its service to the community, and explained why the tax impact was what it was, including the ramifications of any shortfall in collecting revenue to support the district. The district

⁶³ Ibid.

made sure this prospectus went to every home in Hilliard City School District and that it was given out at every public and private event possible. Dr. Marschhausen was amazed by the number of senior citizens who walked into community meetings with the prospectus and the Hilliard City Schools newsletter in hand.⁶⁴ He knew the message was beginning to resonate.

The superintendent also engaged staff attended meetings, shared facts, and answered questions. The school district was able to use teachers as a trusted voice for the school district and made sure that they were kept informed so that they could share the message out in the community.

Dr. Marschhausen also communicated the message via Hilliard District's social media, ensuring that the message was presented consistently on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. As stated in the literature review, most school districts treat social media with trepidation for legal reasons. Hilliard is an exception. Besides having a presence on the platforms listed above, it had, and at the time of this writing still maintains, a very active blog on its website. Dr. Marschhausen's personal twitter account had trended near musician Justin Bieber's (who enjoyed the second largest Twitter following in the world at the time⁶⁵) when he cancelled school because of snow a year earlier.

The message being continually communicated through these social media concerned preserving quality of education. Dr. Marschhausen appeared in videos along with the mayor and other local officials, teachers, parents, and community members, discussing why the schools played such an important role in the prosperity and strong

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ <http://friendorfollow.com/twitter/most-followers/>.

home values Hilliard enjoyed. The videos were published on all the social media on which Hilliard District had a presence, and the need to preserve the high-quality education that Hilliard boasted even made an impact on the younger members of the community.

A final component involved in communicating the message consisted of personal meetings that Dr. Marschhausen and his leadership team conducted. These were in the form of “coffee klatches” held in someone’s living room with twelve to twenty people to listen to Dr. Marschhausen and other leaders talk about the schools and then take individual questions from the group. These were very taxing for Dr. Marschhausen, who did more than seventy of these leading up to the levy. Moreover, Dr. Marschhausen had to be careful he was doing these on non-school time and in his capacity as a private individual. As Ingle et al. (2013) state:

Particularly germane to this study is §9.03 of the Ohio Revised Code, which stipulates that political subdivisions can expend public funds to communicate information, but not to support or oppose the passage of a levy or bond issue. Ohio law limits the role that districts and their personnel can play in campaigns, such that each district finances their campaigns through private donations. School and district personnel can play active roles in the campaigns, but must limit their activities to before and after school hours.⁶⁶

By the time the election arrived, the community was tuned in and receptive to the message Dr. Marschhausen and his team had been communicating. In November 2016, despite the very contentious presidential election, the voters of the Hilliard City School District passed the levy by a resounding 57 percent to 42 percent, the largest percentage of “yes” votes that it had ever gotten. It was also the first time in the district’s history that a levy issue was passed on its first request.

⁶⁶ Ingle et al., “Campaign Expenditures in School Levy Referenda and Their Relationship to Voter Approval,” 52.

Case Study 3: Upper Arlington, Ohio

Upper Arlington is a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, with a population of 33,771 as of the 2010 census. Upper Arlington is a community that prides itself on its high-quality education and parental involvement. Over many generations, after leaving the area for college, many born in Upper Arlington have returned there to raise their own children. Undoubtedly, this is a community that values education, and so it should come as no surprise that Upper Arlington has long supported its schools through passage of local school levies. Indeed, prior to 2012, the last time the community voted down a levy initiative was in 1992. Between that year and 2012, nearly every three years the voters had approved levies to maintain and improve the school system.⁶⁷

In 2012, the Upper Arlington Schools School Board requested money via a levy request and were refused. Its previous request had been in 2007, and the normal timing would have been 2010 for the next levy request. However, Upper Arlington Schools did not require additional funding in 2010 and so waited for two additional years to field a levy, mistakenly thinking that its taxpayers would be grateful for the delay. This assumption was incorrect, however, as the community, and the levy was voted down 55 percent to 45 percent in the district's first levy loss since 1992. Opposition to the levy request, which called itself *Educate UA*, was well organized and led by a retired teacher of the Upper Arlington School District.

Upper Arlington was, and still is, a community having high expectations, and, for some time preceding this loss, many community members had felt that the prevalent attitude within the school district was simply to rest on its laurels, content to be satisfied

⁶⁷ Miller, "Observations from the School Campaign Trail," 12.

with its past stellar academic reputation. This attitude of coasting was evident in the somewhat dismissive manner in which the Upper Arlington School District communicated with its community. Too much was taken for granted in the eyes of the Upper Arlington voter.

Subsequent to the vote, during the summer of 2013, with the exception of the school treasurer, the district's central office leadership had changed and a new leadership team, including a new school district superintendent, Superintendent Imhoff, was brought in. Immediately realizing that his predecessor had failed to engage with the community, he committed to do so as long as he was Superintendent of Upper Arlington School District. On July 1, Superintendent Imhoff's first day in office, he immediately asked each of Upper Arlington's five board of education members for names of community members representing varying ages, lengths of time residing in the community, and demographics. As a first step, he wished to identify a representative sample of community members.⁶⁸

During that first month of his term, the superintendent held approximately 100 meetings with individuals, couples, and, more rarely, groups of three or four citizens, taking careful notes during each. During these personal Q&A sessions, he always asked voters for their feelings about the previous levy and the reasons for its failure. Some recurring themes emerged from these discussions.

The first theme was that the district frequently did not communicate with the district's citizens and, in the rare instances it did, the communication effort simply wasn't effective. Second and closely related to the first was a sense that the school district had

⁶⁸ Paul Imhoff, "Personal Communication (12/15/16)," 2016.

stopped listening to its community. Third was a perception that the school district viewed itself as existing to serve the teachers primarily and the students and community as a whole to a much lesser extent. Fourth, the school district was widely perceived as a poor steward of the taxpayers' money. In effect, many community members told Superintendent Imhoff, the school district had grown fat and lazy, and its best days were behind it.

To explore these findings further, Imhoff hired a survey research firm to poll the community on their attitudes and feelings toward the Upper Arlington School District. The findings confirmed what Superintendent Imhoff had discovered during his first one hundred meetings as superintendent: that there was a major disconnect between the school district and the Upper Arlington community. Superintendent Imhoff concluded that the school district had indeed been wasteful with the money entrusted to it, and this waste, which the community had noted, had led to a great deal of anger towards and mistrust in the school district even among those who would typically have been its strongest supporters—presidents of PTOs, booster chairs, and parents of children participating in secondary school activities.

The hardest piece of information to swallow that the superintendent gleaned from his meetings was an extreme lack of trust in the position of superintendent itself. His predecessor was not viewed as accessible, had not been highly visible within the community, and was not believed to have worked very hard at his job. After considering the information obtained through the interviews and before the school district headed into the upcoming levy campaign, Superintendent Imhoff realized that the district had to

improve its communications. Moreover, the cooperation and support of everyone working for the school district would be needed in this effort.⁶⁹

Superintendent Imhoff also initiated a series of actions focused primarily on improving the district's communication with its community. He hired not only a communications director but also a communications consulting company to advise the district. Considering the district's website to be substandard and in need of revamping, he initiated a quick patch job prior to the levy and planned a major redesign of the entire site after the levy. In addition, also prior to the levy, Imhoff and his team redesigned and rewrote all written communications that were being sent to both the staff and the Upper Arlington community as quickly as possible, to make sure it had an impact. With a reinvigorated communications machine in place, Imhoff began the long task of reestablishing the community's trust in the school district.

In order to accomplish this, he strongly believed that the community needed a specific person, a representative of the Upper Arlington School District, that it could point to and say, "Yes, I trust the district in general but I trust that person in particular because I know him." The position of superintendent was the natural one to which the community could look to represent the school district and to endow with its trust, and so the superintendent made himself visible within the community, seeking to form personal relationships with community members. Therefore, he continued his community meetings after that first month and then added meetings in the homes of community members over the eight weeks prior to the levy. These home meetings occurred seven days a week with the exception of Halloween, on which no one wanted to meet, and two

⁶⁹ Ibid.

meetings were often held per night, one at 6:00 PM and a second at 7:30 PM. During days, the new superintendent attended every activity possible in order to re-establish trust and be visible to the community.⁷⁰

A further effort made to regain the community's trust was a focus on three areas which the superintendent felt would also be the community's focus in assessing the district's worthiness of its support: the district's efficiency in operation, its accountability to all its stakeholders, and the results it produced. Within each of these three areas, Superintendent Imhoff listed specific commitments, which operationalized these areas, thereby enabling objective measurement of the district's performance. Communicating these commitments widely and publicly resonated with the community members with whom the superintendent spoke; the Upper Arlington community clearly wanted to trust its school district again. However, to restore that trust, Superintendent Imhoff realized, the school district had to first acknowledge that it had gotten off track and had stopped listening to and communicating with its community, and the superintendent freely offered this acknowledgement, both through word and deed.

The decision as to the timing and amount of the levy had been made prior to Superintendent Imhoff's hiring, and, in light of the 2012 failure, the school district had decided to decrease the levy amount requested. The date chosen for the levy was November 5th, 2013, just four months after Imhoff's hiring, meaning that the new superintendent had to work fast before the campaign began in earnest. Although the decision to decrease the levy had been made prior to his hiring, under Superintendent Imhoff, many cuts had been made across the district that exceeded the amount needed to

⁷⁰ Ibid.

balance the budget with the smaller levy request, and he made the cuts a frequent subject of the district's communication campaign with respect to the levy.

Even with the cuts, however, the Upper Arlington School District's per-pupil expenditure was still one of the highest in Ohio. The charge that the district's cost per pupil was higher than it should have been with the community getting nothing extra for the excess expenditure had been the rallying cry of the 2012 levy's organized opposition *Educate UA*. At the time, the school district had the second highest per-pupil expenditure in Central Ohio, occupying third place among Ohio's school districts. Prior to the 2012 levy, *Educate UA* successfully sold the idea to the community that the school district was spending a lot but failing to deliver a lot in return. By way of comparison, they used a nearby school district that spent less money per pupil but boasted higher test scores. As the previous district administration had failed to answer these charges, this false fact had become accepted knowledge within the community.

Superintendent Imhoff's communication campaign challenged this perception head on, going on the offensive by admitting that, yes, the Upper Arlington District did indeed have a higher per-pupil expenditure than most other Ohio districts but that this higher expenditure allowed the district to offer more to the district's children as a consequence. Rather than a disadvantage, the new superintendent proudly admitted the high expenditure, turning what could have been a disadvantage into an advantage.⁷¹

In doing so, the Superintendent capitalized on the community's perception of itself as unique. Pointing out that the Upper Arlington School District offered more programs than districts with smaller expenditures per pupil, he rendered comparison with

⁷¹ Ibid.

nearby districts, even the oft-referenced neighboring district with lower per-student expenditures but higher test scores, meaningless. The Upper Arlington programs included 32 varsity sports, 80 clubs, every AP/Ivy offering that was available, along with 140 titles, and recognition in the arts. To support levy passage, the new superintendent pointed to the entire basket of products offered by the district to its children as well as pupil performance on tests, i.e., the programs, scholarships, average ACT scores, and other measures. The message from Superintendent Imhoff was direct: the school district was bigger than one state test, and it offered more to the district's children than one test score represented. While educating the community as to Upper Arlington's program offerings and the costs associated with these programs, Superintendent Imhoff hit on an issue that resonated with the community: that this community was truly unique among Ohio communities, and the district's unique programming was simply more proof of this uniqueness.

Over time, Superintendent Imhoff came to share the community's view of itself. Having worked within a number of high-achieving suburban school districts, he came to view the Upper Arlington School District as standing out among those. By also embracing the community's sense of pride, he was able to assert confidently that, yes, the Upper Arlington School District did spend more than almost every other comparable district but that this allowed the district to offer a wider variety of programs than other locales and so was of a piece with the unique nature of the community. Because he was engaging in frank communications with his community, Superintendent Imhoff was able to make a statement rarely heard in public education, that he and his administration were proud to spend relatively more dollars per student in spite of having eliminated wasteful

spending, and, even more rarely observed, that he had the community's support in doing so.⁷²

To communicate to the community that the Upper Arlington School District was truly committed to real change, it had to clear the decks in a number of areas. In order to make the changes necessary to enhance communication with the community and so assure it that the district was serious about instituting real change, a significant number of hiring's had to occur. In addition, when almost all of the school district's central office staff had been merely "mentally skating by," a leadership vacuum was created. The school board, uncertain how to address the previous administration's failure at the polls and desperate, gave Superintendent Imhoff *carte blanche* with respect to district decision making, thereby providing him a unique opportunity to build his administration almost completely from scratch.

Typically, when a new superintendent takes over, some, if not all, of the previous superintendent's staff are still present, and the new superintendent must assume the challenge of communicating to this staff that changes are needed, an idea to which this staff will most likely be resistant. Such was the case here with respect to the district's teachers. In this particular case, the district employees that remained when the previous superintendent left were primarily the teachers, and they were simply unaware of the depths of the community's distrust of the school district. The reason underlying their lack of awareness was the school district's communications strategy, which had been directed primarily inward, toward the district's employees, rather than outward, toward the community. In addition, as mentioned previously, the district's services, including

⁷² Ibid.

communications, were primarily directed at meeting the teachers' needs and not those of the students or the external community, a tendency that many parents and community members had noted and commented upon to Superintendent Imhoff. Superintendent Imhoff quickly communicated, tactfully but firmly, to the teachers that they were only one of several stakeholder types with an interest in the Upper Arlington District and that the primary recipients of the district's services, which the teachers helped provide, were the pupils and community. Although the teachers understood the need to put students and community first, this change in focus did not come easily to them at first. Conditioned to view themselves as the primary recipients of district services, they were thrown off balance by this new direction, which represented a radical change. The superintendent later commented that the teachers had undergone a form of grieving process as a result of this change, which he had had to help them through.⁷³

Another challenge facing Superintendent Imhoff was the Upper Arlington School District's failure to use social media, an oversight he found shocking in this day and age. He immediately put his new communications team to work establishing district presences on Facebook and Twitter. (The campaign team in 2012 did use social media even when the Upper Arlington School District itself did not.) Once these were up, the district's communications consultant advised the district to begin posting short videos ranging from 90 seconds to two minutes in length, a tool that the superintendent quickly discovered was extremely effective in communicating the new district message to the community.

⁷³ Ibid.

The changes in how the school district communicated with its community did not stop with social media, however. The district started fresh by throwing out all the old templates and instituting new ones, including adoption of a new logo to give the district a new look. In addition, the name and format of the district newsletter were also changed. As Superintendent Imhoff later stated, their aim was to demonstrate in every way possible that a new day was beginning for the Upper Arlington School District.⁷⁴

In conclusion, the work that Superintendent Imhoff and the Upper Arlington School District paid off. Late in the fall of 2013, a campaign for a new levy began, and the Upper Arlington voters had heard the message their new superintendent had sought to communicate: they had been listened to, their support would not be taken for granted in the future, and the school district would not skate by on past performance. Upper Arlington's voters recognized that the promise made in the summer of 2013, i.e., asking a lot and delivering a lot in return, was already being realized. On November 5, 2013, Upper Arlington's voters rewarded Superintendent Imhoff and the Upper Arlington School District for their hard work by voting for a new levy by a large margin, 57 percent in favor and 42 percent opposed. The work that made such a turnaround possible had occurred, before the campaign for the levy issue even started, when the Upper Arlington District instituted the changes that made it deserving of the community's support and then stated its case to the community.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Discussion

Public school leaders face several challenges centered around communication. First, communication does not come naturally to a typical school district administrator. Educators are trained to educate, and the skills required for this role do not always dovetail neatly with those required in widespread communication with the school's community. Another hurdle involves the money involved in such communication. Public school districts can be quite frugal when it comes to spending money on things that do not directly impact student education, and even something as basic as a community newsletter can be an expensive proposition for a public school district. In addition, public educators have a natural desire to add extensive details to even the smallest points, eventually rendering the communication unclear and perhaps even totally ineffective.

Thanks to technology and changing expectations around how a public school district should communicate, however, the tide is beginning to turn with respect to tactics and aptitudes involved in communicating with the community. In Ohio, as early as ten years ago, public school districts tended to communicate with the public only when a levy was on the ballot. Since then, public school districts have come under criticism for this selective communication, with communities asking to hear from their public schools more frequently and, in particular, not just around levy time. When passing a levy became increasingly difficult, public school districts came to realize that they were failing to meet community expectations, particularly regarding communication. In response, some public school districts changed their approach and committed both time and resources to communicating and marketing their schools year around.

The methods and tactics used have thus evolved, as the three case studies discussed above show. Below I will highlight and discuss these methods and tactics in greater depth. Below is a brief summary of these:

Table 1. Summary of communication techniques and methods employed in the case studies.

Technique	Summary
Hiring Communication Consulting Help	Hiring an outside communication expert to assist the school district in messaging and communication execution is shown to have a positive impact for the school district's communication efforts.
Survey Research	Using data to understand what the school district's community wants and what they want to hear about from the school district can have a positive impact on the reception of the school communication efforts.
Newsletters/Direct Mail	Using traditional direct mail is still one of the most effective ways of communication for a school district to connect with its community.
Social Media	This tool can be used as an inexpensive and powerful two-way communication vehicle for a school district, especially when connecting with its parent community.
Two-Way Communication	School districts need to be active listeners as well as aggressive communicators. This type of communication helps the district's community buy into what the school district is trying to accomplish.
Personal Interaction	Personal interaction with the school district's superintendent is the most powerful way of communicating with the public. Though time consuming, it helps the community through two-way communication understand the needs and goals of the school district.
Interpretation of Superintendent Role	The school superintendent is the CEO of the school district. The culture they establish within the district and how they communicate it to the larger community is a factor in how a school district's community receives and accepts its message.

Hiring Communication Consulting Help

A communications consulting firm can aid a district in conducting survey research into the school district's opinion environment, in developing a strong message to communicate to the district's community, and in helping plan district communications going forward. Although all are important, the last two deserve special attention. A consulting firm can help a school district target the audiences to whom its message should be directed, craft the message itself, and determine channels through which the message is to be delivered.

Hiring a communications consulting firm was a tactic common to all three case studies, which illustrated the varied and useful roles that a consultant can play in helping a school district communicate with its community. The Hilliard City Schools case study illustrated how a consulting firm aided the district in decisions involving all aspects of its communication strategy: message recipients, communication channels, and timing of messaging, a particularly important issue in that particular case.

In the Piqua City Schools case study, the consultant helped the district with the content of its messaging, suggesting creation of the "Taxpayer's Bill of Rights" that proved so effective in Piqua's efforts to re-establish its credibility with the community. In the Upper Arlington case study, the consultant aided the district in identifying a communications channel (i.e., video) that met the district's need to get its message out quickly and effectively. The newly hired superintendent, facing a very tight timeline between entering his job and the start of the upcoming levy campaign, relied on the district's consultant to find a channel through which to quickly broadcast the district's new message—that the district could be a good steward of the resources with which it

was entrusted while continuing to deliver the varied, high-quality package of services to the district's children that the community desired. The consultant's solution—posting short videos (i.e., ranging from 90 seconds to two minutes in length) on social media and on the district's website—proved highly effective.

Like those in the three case studies, many educators recognize that they are not communication experts and so are willing to seek outside expert advice to help their school districts.

Survey Research

Survey research, called “polling” in the recent past, is used to investigate public opinion. Also in the recent past, those polled by researchers working for school districts were usually parents of children attending school within the district, and they are rightly viewed as having an obvious bias in favor of the schools in general and of educational levies in particular. Unfortunately for the school district, however, parents typically constitute only about 25 percent of the community's electorate, according to Fallon Research. Moreover, although parents can be passionate influencers within a community, nonparents tend to view them as having an obvious bias and so are skeptical of their advocacy for the schools.

School districts now administer surveys not just to parents but to samples representative of the entire community, and the resulting data allow them to map viewpoints from the entire community, regardless of age, sex, partisan persuasion, or parent/nonparent status. As illustrated in the case studies, these surveys can be instrumental in helping school districts refine their message to their communities.

School districts have begun to understand that what you say and to whom you say it are just as important as how much you say it. Before surveys became commonly used tools by school districts, many of them just “pushed paper out the door,” hoping that a message would find the right recipients and stick, an extremely wasteful tactic for the district in time and money. Survey research thus helps school districts discover what people want and need to hear but also who needs to hear what.

School districts always face fiscal challenges, and survey research provides no exception. Depending on the number of participants and the type of feedback employed, these services can range from \$10,000 to \$50,000.⁷⁵ Larger and wealthier school districts are able to manage these costs, but, for smaller and/or poorer school districts, the cost of having a survey done could be equivalent as that of hiring a first-year teacher.

When a school district fails to pass a levy, it is not unusual for it to hire a survey researcher to administer a survey to the community to see why the levy failed. Miller (2014), in her dissertation, describes how a post-levy survey discovered surprisingly that only 62 percent of parents supported the levy in a community that had traditionally supported its public schools.⁷⁶ This type of insight is invaluable in informing a school district on where to focus its communication and marketing efforts.

Another important piece of information that surveys provide is insight on where people obtain their information. Frequently, a school district will invest in one communication vehicle but then will discover that this vehicle does not connect with a large segment of their community or with the segment with which it wished to

⁷⁵ Florence, “School District Bond Campaigns,” 392.

⁷⁶ Miller, “Observations from the School Campaign Trail,” 139.

communicate. As an example, a school district may decide that it will no longer post ads or information in the local paper, because it believes that nobody reads the paper anymore, frequently a flawed assumption, as research from as far back as 1994 shows that most people obtain their information about the public schools from their local newspapers.⁷⁷

As seen in the Piqua case study, a public opinion survey can provide an important first step allowing a school district to determine the what, who, and how questions of communicating with their communities. Without the survey it conducted, Piqua District would not have learned of the almost total lack of awareness within the community about the over three million dollars in budget cuts that the district had made. The fact that the district had made these cuts became a vital part of the message Piqua communicated during its upcoming levy campaign.

Survey research also played a critical role in the other two cases studies. In the Hilliard case study, survey research informed the district as to when the community might be willing to entertain a levy request. In the Upper Arlington case study, the district used survey research to verify the public perception that the district was disconnected and out of touch with the community. The information obtained through surveys in all three case studies was critical to effectively communicating and connecting with their communities prior to their respective levy requests.

Related to surveys was use of focus groups by Upper Arlington's and Piqua's district management. By way of focus groups, Hilliard's district management determined that, aside from members of the electorate involved in agriculture, most greatly preferred

⁷⁷ Florence, "School District Bond Campaigns," 78.

that the upcoming levy be a property tax rather than an income tax, which would have been greatly unpopular with the majority of community members. Hilliard District also employed focus groups to identify and explore the community's concerns about too rapidly growing in size, a valuable piece of political knowledge.

Newsletters/Direct Mail

In the era of technology where instant communication is readily available, print newsletters have become less popular as a tool with which school districts communicate with their communities. In addition, printing and mailing incur significant costs, and “going green” and using less paper have contributed to the declining use of print newsletters. Moreover, newsletters are a “one-way” form of communication, which Florence (2014) defines as “linear, unilateral, but limited because it occurs in a straight line from sender to receiver.”⁷⁸ As shown in Figure 2, also taken from Florence (2014), one-way communication utilized by school districts “serves to inform, persuade, or dictate.”⁷⁹

Newsletters do, however, have their place. Hoy and Miskel (2001) point out the advantages of one-way communication. Organizing their thoughts and arguments “encourages administrators and teachers to think through their ideas, accurately articulate them, and provide specificity in their instructions, explanations, and descriptions.” Moreover, the authors point out, “one-way strategies typically imply strong linkages

⁷⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

between communication behavior and action.... It conveys a strong emphasis on efficiency and goal achievement.”⁸⁰

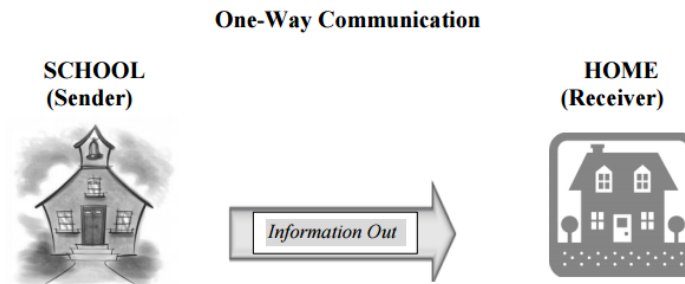


Figure 2. One-way communication. Source: Florence (2004).

Newsletters are essential. As seen in the case studies, all of the school districts researched recognized the importance of having a community newsletter. Ingle et al. (2013) comment that a school district can use newsletters to help remind people to vote but not advocate whom to vote for.⁸¹ However, as mentioned previously, sending out newsletters only during levy time most likely causes resentment from community members, who rightly believe the school administration only pays attention to them when it needs them to give it money.

In the case studies, each of the districts began to give their communities a steady diet of newsletters, regardless of whether they were currently on the ballot or not. Newsletters have advantages that no other communication vehicles have: First, they are able to reach the entire voting community, not just parents. Secondly, they are most likely to reach the group with the highest voting propensity: senior citizens. For example, in the Piqua case study, the district published a newsletter called “The Drumbeat” sent

⁸⁰ W. K. Hoy and C. G. Miskel, *Educational Administration: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 6th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2001), 360.

⁸¹ Ingle et al., “Campaign Expenditures in School Levy Referenda and Their Relationship to Voter Approval,” 52.

quarterly. In spite of cheaper electronic communication vehicles, the Piqua community had a significant elderly population that tended not to be as connected to the web as the district's younger citizens, thus making the more expensive print newsletter a critical communication vehicle for Piqua.

A third advantage of newsletters is that they are able to convey different messages to different parts of the community. A newsletter can inform nonparents of budget and future tax impacts, things that are important to that group; and it can convey how student achievement is being measured against other school districts in the county, which is important to parents. Newsletters also allow school districts to set the tone of the discussion within the community around the issues facing the district. In a time where newspaper readership is falling, newsletters have been able to replace newspapers as the go-to source for information in the district provided they are sent on a regular (e.g., quarterly) basis.

Most direct mail from school districts is in the form of a traditional letter on letterhead or a postcard (many times oversized) typically from the school district superintendent or a principal. We live in a time of constant junk mail, and the need to get noticed via mail is at a premium. A traditional letter can cut through junk mail and get noticed.

Before a levy request, school district superintendents will typically send out a letter to the community announcing the upcoming levy and describing the specific need the levy is intended to meet, information that typically aligns with the district's survey-driven message. In the Hilliard City School District case study, an eight-page "prospectus" that detailed the school district's finances was mailed to all residents. A

school principal might send out a letter encouraging people to vote or announcing a new program their school is offering. These mailings help reinforce the message that the school seeks to continually engage with its community. In the Upper Arlington case study, Superintendent Imhoff, recognizing the major disconnect between his school district and the community, felt the need to redesign all communication pieces sent out by the district, including letters and newsletters, to communicate that a new day was dawning in the district. The new look helped reignite interest in what the school district was doing and showed that the Upper Arlington school district cared about reconnecting with its community.

Social Media

When social media first arrived on the scene, many school district superintendents viewed them with great skepticism, and many school boards worried about liability issues associated with students and staff using social media.⁸² The various social media were viewed as places where serious content could not be shared and where gossip and chatter could occur and be subject to little or no control by the school district. However, today, social media have come to be viewed as one of the best *two-way* communication tools available to school districts, and this attitude is apparent in two of the three case studies. (The events depicted in the third, Piqua, occurred in 2008, when use of social media was just beginning to become common.)

In the Hilliard case study, the Hilliard City School District exhibited no such skepticism toward social media. Both the superintendent and the Hilliard City School

⁸² Florence, "School District Bond Campaigns," 83.

District had a presence on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, and the district website boasted (and at this time of this writing still boasts) a very active blog running off of it. As described earlier, the superintendent's personal Twitter account once trended comparably with a popular entertainment figure's. Social media activity proved a powerful tool in helping the Hilliard City School District reinforce its message to its community. Likewise, one of Upper Arlington Superintendent Imhoff's first actions was to establish presences for the district on Facebook and Twitter, thereby granting him immediate and much needed credibility with the community. It also communicated that he was not going to take his relationship with the community for granted and that continual communication, and not just one-way communication, with it was going to constitute a priority for him. In short, the platforms were used in daily communications to the community, and their use reinforced the messages that had evolved as a result of the survey studies and focus groups.

Videos, whose use the social media enabled, constituted another tool that emerged from the case studies. Shooting high-quality video is now easy and cheap, making it accessible to many people quickly. Once captured, these can be shared, with YouTube being the largest storehouse for videos on the web and the second largest search engine in the world, with YouTube owned by the number one search engine in the world, Google.⁸³

In concert with its use of social media, Upper Arlington also employed videos extensively in that case study. Video could be posted not just on YouTube but on Facebook and Twitter as well, thus allowing the school district to make personal appeals

⁸³ YouTube – The 2nd Largest Search Engine (Infographic),” <https://www.mushroomnetworks.com/infographics/youtube---the-2nd-largest-search-engine-infographic>.

and give first-hand testimony in short and long videos concerning the work the district did prior to the levy request. The personal nature of this type of appeal allowed the district to set the tone, which a speaker can do during filming, and to make a point much more easily, as a spoken appeal has much more impact than a written one.

Providing visuals of their needs and the work they do helps school districts reinforce their message prior to going on the ballot. Thus, videos also help show the human side of the work that school districts do: educating children and being a critical component in the fabric of the community.

Two-Way Communication

The communication discussed up to this point has been one-way, from the school district to its community, and this form is important. However, *two-way communication* is also essential and played a highly important role in all three case studies. Florence (2014) differentiates two-way communication from one-way communication in that the former “includes feedback from the receiver to the sender,” as shown in Figure 3.⁸⁴ For two-way communication to be effective, it must be “negotiated,” that is, senders and recipients must be “willing to make changes to work together as in a dialogue” and must be willing to “listen to each other and gather information they need before responding.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ibid, 47.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

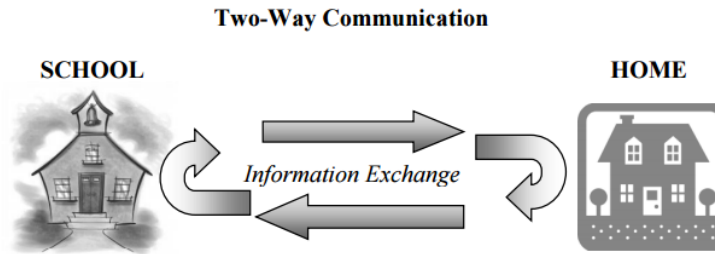


Figure 3. Two-way communication. Source: Florence (2014).

District management in all three case studies made a point to not only enable but actively seek communication from community members. On his first day in office, Superintendent Imhoff of Upper Arlington District requested that each member of the school board give him the names of citizens with varying demographic characteristics that he could talk with to learn about the citizenry of his new district and their concerns. He also made himself available for meetings in the homes of community members as the time before the levy vote shortened, inviting questions regarding the district and its operations. Dr. Marschhausen of Hilliard District created as many opportunities as possible (monthly ‘coffee with the superintendent,’ blogs) for community members to approach him with concerns or simply to chat. Superintendent Hanes of Piqua established teacher, student, and citizen advisory committees to invite feedback from the various stakeholders within his community. In this way, these superintendents followed Florence’s advice by indicating that they would “listen and gather information they need before responding.”⁸⁶

In all cases, the superintendents communicated that they had, indeed, gotten the message their communities were trying to send them. Rather than the unpopular property tax levy, Hilliard’s district leadership listened to the results of the focus groups and

⁸⁶ Ibid., 47.

instead floated an income tax levy, which passed. Only after Superintendent Imhoff of Upper Arlington acknowledged that the district had gotten off the tracks and realized that it had erred by losing its proper focus on the district—the community’s children and not the teachers—could he restore its credibility and regain the trust that had been lost.

In addition, the social media platforms discussed above not only allow communication from the school district to the community but from community members to the school districts. Facebook chat rooms are becoming popular in an educational context,⁸⁷ as are “Tweet-ups,” scheduled meetings on Twitter. In the two case studies in which these played a part, these also enabled two-way communication. The benefits associated with using them are great, and as more of the taxpaying community ties into social media through mobile devices, public schools have to join the conversation.

Personal Interaction

Personal interaction can occur in many venues and is a type of two-way communication that proved extremely effective in the case studies. It is also, of course, highly connected to two-way communication. According to studies in the literature, people get most of their information about schools from their children, friends, and local newspapers. Moreover, people tend to view information from these sources as being of much higher quality than information derived from media.⁸⁸ In effect, people in the community tend to place their trust in the school superintendent, principal, teacher, and

⁸⁷ Miller, “Observations from the School Campaign Trail,” 97.

⁸⁸ Florence, “School District Bond Campaigns,” 78.

parent, who in many cases may be a neighbor, member of their church, or friend from other social circles.

To enlist ambassadors for the schools was one motivation for Piqua City Schools Superintendent Hanes to set up multiple committees to connect with the various stakeholder types in his community (teachers, students, parents). His communication consultant explained that the members of these committees would have credibility equivalent to that of a school official and so also would have a stake in the outcome of the levy.⁸⁹ By keeping the people on these committees informed of what was going, Hanes had a small army of ambassadors getting the word out about Piqua City School District.

The types of personal interactions employed in the case studies were as follows:

- *One-on-one & group meetings (Upper Arlington, Hilliard)*
- *Committees (Piqua)*
- *Town hall style meetings (Piqua)*
- *Coffee klatches (Hilliard)*
- *Attendance to sporting and/or cultural events in the community (Upper Arlington)*

Typically, each event includes a particular group so the school district leader/representative can craft and convey the message in such a way that suits that particular group. For example, a school district superintendent attending a coffee klatch at a senior center might talk about how effective schools help maintain strong property values and keep crime low. The superintendent in the Hilliard case study held such meetings in senior centers and in many parent and nonparent living rooms also. In contrast, a principal holding a town hall style meeting with parents might discuss student achievement, the type of programming needed, and the cost to achieve this.

⁸⁹ Hanes, "Personal Communication (12/01/16)."

Personal interaction is easily the most time-consuming technique used by school districts, but, as Florence's research shows, it is also the most impactful. In the Upper Arlington case study, Superintendent Imhoff engaged in over one hundred one-on-one meetings to get an understanding of the challenges he was facing in his new school district. This activity set him on a successful course to get the school district in the right position to pass its levy after a previous stunning defeat. This was so successful for Superintendent Imhoff that he continued the practice and began attending large coffee klatches like those employed by Superintendent Marschhausen.

Interpretation of Superintendent Role

In all three case studies, the district superintendent played a crucial role, and, in effect, the manner in which the individual occupying that role chose to interpret it decided the failure or success of his district, which, in the context of the case study, was represented by levy passage. Although the superintendents in all three case studies seemed to have, in retrospect, made the "right" decisions in their interpretations of the role, they could easily have chosen differently; Superintendent Imhoff of Upper Arlington was described as distressed that the role of superintendent was viewed so negatively in the community due to how the previous superintendent had interpreted the role. More specifically, this predecessor apparently chose not to make himself accessible or be highly visible within the community and was viewed as not working very hard at his job. The same can be said for Superintendent Hanes in Piqua; there were many less painful he could have approached the challenges he faced, he chose the hardest route possible and was rewarded for it.

One research question for which this research was created to answer involved the role of superintendent in creating a district culture that valued pro-active two-way communication with the community. As evidenced in all three case studies, the superintendent played a pivotal role, in this area and in others. Each superintendent chose to stress the importance of communication, making sure they were seen as the primary communicator for their school district. As far as other aspects of the culture, Superintendent Imhoff of the Upper Arlington case study had to drastically re-orient the priorities and values prevalent within his district, which had in the past viewed the district as existing to primarily support the teachers. Superintendent Imhoff asserted, the stakeholders that the district, including the teachers, was founded to support were the community and the community members' children enrolled in district schools. Imhoff describes this as being a radical change of the district's culture, one that he had to help the district personnel, in particular the teachers, adjust to.⁹⁰

Aside from being the prime agent of change within each case and molder of district culture, each superintendent was the figure representing the district in the minds of community members and had to decide what this figure would look like and how it would act. Superintendent Imhoff stated this explicitly. He strongly believed that the community needed a specific person, a representative of the Upper Arlington School District, that it could point to and say, "Yes, I trust the district in general but I trust that person in particular because I know him." His community, in particular, had built up a reservoir of distrust in the district and its previous management. To communicate the district's willingness to communicate with its community, he made it a point to attend as

⁹⁰ Imhoff, "Personal Communication (12/15/16)."

many community events as possible and form personal relationships with key community members.

The superintendents filled still other roles. One was as chief strategist for the district. All except Superintendent Imhoff, who came on board at Upper Arlington only months prior to the upcoming ballot, were described as mulling different strategic options with regard to levy timing, size, and overall strategy. Superintendent Hanes of Piqua, in particular, had to decide between three, very different courses of action, with respect to trimming bloated district resources and funding requests. Inherent in this role was being primarily responsible for the district's fiscal aspects; as did the other superintendents, Hilliard's Dr. Marschhausen made financial decisions concerning the operation of his district and created and widely disseminated a prospectus detailing its finances within the community.

A final choice in superintendent role that was evident in the case studies was accepting responsibility for the district's actions, even those performed under a previous individual filling the role. Superintendent Hanes saw this through his research on the Piqua community and wrote a "Taxpayers Bill of Rights" promising a change from the ways of the past. In Upper Arlington, when his district had lost its focus under the previous superintendent, Superintendent Imhoff acknowledged that fact, apologized to the community, and promised that the district would not repeat this error. In this way, he regained the trust of Upper Arlington District's community.

Conclusion

The discussion above has touched on the major techniques employed by district leadership in communicating with their communities as revealed in the three case studies.

Although advances in technology certainly played an important role in these, the primary component was a genuine desire to establish a respectful and open dialogue with the community.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to answer the primary question: *Do a school district's ongoing, pro-active two-way communication efforts with its community, both during a levy campaign and prior to its beginning, increase likelihood of the levy's passage?* Other questions emerged from this overarching one: *What is the role of district leadership in creating and fostering a culture that values ongoing, pro-active two-way communication with the community? Does Ohio's high frequency of levies force superintendents there to do things outside their comfort zones?*

The cases presented here share two common factors. First, each school district had experienced failure in their history at the ballot box before successfully passing the levy described in the case study. Second, in light of this failure at the ballot box, each brought in professional assistance to help in communicating its story to its communities. All the districts in the case studies used both a professional survey researcher and a professional communications firm to assist them.

Although not as rigorous as a controlled experiment, the success following failures in each case indicates that the district was doing something right. I would therefore contend that this research did highlight the importance of pro-active communication efforts with the community.

The superintendent in each case clearly occupied a key role in the successful passage of the levy, acting both as a representative of his district in the eyes of the community and as the prime mover of change in his district. Included in the latter was his role in establishing the district's organizational culture, including the value it placed on two-way communication.

With respect to the final question concerning the superintendent's comfort zone, the men occupying that role in these three case studies clearly found themselves stretched in the situations in which they found themselves, although they appeared to comport themselves very well in difficult circumstances. Superintendent Imhoff of Upper Arlington, in particular, came into the position within four months of the ballot that included his district's levy, and therefore had to very quickly get up to speed. All had to wear many hats, as the discussion of their interpretations of the role of superintendent above details, in the successful turning around of their districts.

The final question was as follows: *How does the school district determine that it needs to commit limited resources—both formal and informal—to pro-active communication efforts?* The research suggests that engaging in proactive two-way communications is a highly successful strategy in levy passage and therefore does make expenditures associated with it worthwhile. However, the amount of such resources spent must depend on the particular district's situation and so must be decided on a case-by-case basis by the district itself.

Contributions of Study

Ohio levy studies are relatively new to the educational research literature. The studies conducted to date have primarily been quantitative and so have involved analyzing data; few qualitative, ethnographic studies such as that of Florence (2014) and this one have explored aspects of everyday life in a district and in a district's levy campaign. Since school levy campaigns are increasing—and are projected to continually

increase in the current economic climate,⁹¹ such studies as this will be of benefit both to practitioners and to academicians.

Although historically Ohio schools have been largely funded through local property taxes, a steady decline in public school funding from the state of Ohio is forcing local school districts to compensate for the shortfalls. The most increasingly common method for communities to recoup this phantom revenue is to ask its voters to pass ballot initiatives at ever-increasing rates. These near-constant levy campaigns are costing communities dearly, both financially and in terms of the good will that exists between the schools and its community.⁹²

Although previous literature has highlighted some of the techniques presented herein,⁹³ exploration of their use in the diverse settings represented here is of value and possesses some unique features. Upper Arlington, for instance, was primarily suburban, Piqua rural, and Hilliard a diverse mixture of suburban, rural, and urban. Thus, context could comprise a valuable dimension of the observations made as part of this research. It is hoped that the techniques presented here and discussions as to their success or failure in their contexts will be of value to district leadership of all types, who may be motivated to adopt them in their districts.

⁹¹ Ingle et al., "Campaign Expenditures in School Levy Referenda and Their Relationship to Voter Approval," 42.

⁹² Miller, "Observations from the School Campaign Trail," 20.

⁹³ See, for instance, Florence, "School District Bond Campaigns," 39-62, Miller, "Observations from the School Campaign Trail," 90-94, and Carter and Devries, "Ten Commandments of Successful School Tax Campaigns," 212, for importance of communication; Florence, "School District Bond Campaigns," 102, for surveys; Florence, "School District Bond Campaigns," 71, for one-to-one and/or small-group interviews and meetings with community members; and Florence, "School District Bond Campaigns," 82-84, for use of social media.

Study Limitations

This study was limited in scope to three case studies. Much of the research came from one-on-one interviews between the researcher and the school district superintendent. Small sample sizes such as in this research limit the ability to make generalizations and recommendations based upon the findings. While this is a valid critique of the case study approach, it represents a tradeoff with the ability to explore specific situations in great depth, as was done here. Although this approach may potentially not yield highly generalizable results, it compensates through its richness of detail, giving the reader leeway to make his or her own decisions as to cause and effect.

Still another limitation concerned the study time frame, which was limited to one levy ballot issue per case. Obviously, exploring several ballot issues from these same locations and obtaining the same results would add further credence to the results observed here. Finally, potential bias may have been introduced from a personal concern on the part of the researcher, whose communication firm, in which he is a partner, was used in each case study. However, the researcher's role was only advisory, with others from his firm doing much of the day-to-day work interacting with each school district.

The study also suffered from the limitations common to such studies. Findings were based on individual cases involving primarily suburban districts and so were not subject to statistical analysis, with its rigor. Whether the results of the study are generalizable to other Ohio suburban public school districts, other Ohio public school districts, or even to school districts in other states, is therefore unknown.

Future Research

One major purpose of this research was to see if pro-active two-way communications from Ohio public school districts help with levy performance. Due to the limited number of cases studied, a much broader study is recommended. A valuable follow-up study would be to evaluate every Ohio school district with respect to what they spend/do in terms of communications with their communities and their levy performances. This particular emphasis on communication could further validate the results obtained in this study.

Bibliography

- Bali, Valentina A. "The Passage of Education Citizen Initiatives: Evidence from California." *Educational Policy* 22, no. 3 (2008): 422–56.
- Ballotpedia. "School Bond and Tax Election in Ohio." *Ballotpedia: The Encyclopedia of American Politics*, 2015.
http://ballotpedia.org/School_bond_and_tax_elections_in_Ohio.
- Bowers, Alex J., and Jooyoung Lee. "Carried or Defeated?" *Educational Administration Quarterly* 49, no. 5 (2013): 732–67.
- Bowers, Alex J., Scott Alan Metzger, and Matthew Militello. "Knowing What Matters." *Journal of Education Finance* 35, no. 4 (2010): 374–96.
- Carter, Boyd, and Ted Devries. "Ten Commandments of Successful School Tax Campaigns." *Clearing House* 42, no. 4 (1967): 210–12.
- Clemmitt, Marcia. "School Reform." *CQ Researcher* 21 (2011).
- . "School Reform1." *CQ Researcher* 21, no. 17 (2011): 385–408.
<http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre2011042900>.
- Coulson, Andrew J. "State Education Trends Academic Performance and Spending over the Past 40 Years." *Cato Analysis Policy Analysis* 746 (2014).
<https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa746.pdf>.
- Dean, Conrad. "Quantitative Factors Related to the Passage of Kansas School Bond Issues: 1966 to 1971." Kansas State University, 1972.
- Fleeter, H. *Analysis of Ohio School District Operating Levies from 1994 through 2006*. Columbus, OH: Driscoll & Fleeter, 2007.
- Florence, Linda L. "School District Bond Campaigns." DEd diss., Portland State University, 2014.
http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2847&context=open_access_etds.
- Galovic, Thomas. "Educational Referendum Voting in Ohio Based on District Size, Socio-Economic Status, and Median Income." PhD diss., Indiana State University, 2010.

- Hanes, Rick. "Personal Communication (12/01/16)," 2016.
- Hoy, W. K., and C. G. Miskel. *Educational Administration: Theory, Research, and Practice*. 6th ed. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2001.
- Imhoff, Paul. "Personal Communication (12/15/16)," 2016.
- Ingle, William Kyle, Paul A. Johnson, and Ruth Ann Petroff. "A 'Tale of Two Cities': A Comparative Case Study of Community Engagement and Costs in Two Levy Campaigns." *Mid-Western Educational Researcher* 24, no. 2 (2011): 2–14.
- Ingle, William Kyle, Paul A. Johnson, Matt Ryan-Givens, and Jerry Rampelt. "Campaign Expenditures in School Levy Referenda and Their Relationship to Voter Approval: Evidence from Ohio, 2007-2010." *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 12, no. 1 (2013): 41–76.
- Ingle, William Kyle, Paul Andrew Johnson, and Ruth Ann Petroff. "'Hired Guns' and 'Legitimate Voices': The Politics and Participants of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 5 (2012): 814–58. doi:10.1177/0013161X12448251.
- Ingle, William Kyle, Ruth Ann Petroff, and Paul A. Johnson. "Estimating Resource Costs of Levy Campaigns in Five Ohio School Districts." *Journal of Education Finance* 37, no. 1 (2011): 52–71. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_education_finance/v037/37.1.ingle.pdf.
- Jackson, C. Kirabo, Rucker C. Johnson, and Claudia Persico. "Boosting Educational Attainment and Adult Earnings." *Education Next* 15, no. 4 (2015). <http://educationnext.org/boosting-education-attainment-adult-earnings-school-spending/>.
- . "The Effects of School Spending on Educational Economic Outcomes: Evidence from School Finance Reforms." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131, no. 1 (2016): 157–218.
- "John Marschhausen." *District Administration Leadership Institute*, 2017. <https://www.daleadershipinstitute.com/content/john-marschhausen>.
- Johnson, Paul A., and William Kyle Ingle. "Campaign Strategies and Voter Approval of School Referenda: A Mixed Methods Analysis." *Journal of School Public Relations* 30, no. 1 (2009): 51–71.
- Lentz, Corliss. "Predicting School Referenda Outcomes: Answers from Illinois." *Journal*

of Education Finance 24, no. 4 (1999): 459–82.

Marschhausen, John. “Personal Communication (12/06/16),” 2016.

Miller, Leah. “Observations from the School Campaign Trail: An Ethnography of One District’s Levy Committee.” PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2014.

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. “What Are Public Charter Schools?” 2015. <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/public-charter-schools/>.

Newmark, Barbara D. “A School District Decides: A Successful Campaign Strategy.” *Phi Deltan Kappan International* 64, no. 3 (1982): 202–3.

Porterfield, K., and M. Carnes. *Why School Communication Matters: Strategies from PR Professionals*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2008.

Ryan, Timothy. “An Examination of Community Type and School Tax Levy Referenda in Missouri.” Saint Louis University, 2005.

Shock, David. “Shifting Tax Burdens: School District Property and Income Tax Referenda in Ohio, 1988-2000.” Miami University, 2002.

Silverman, Robert Mark. “How Unwavering Is Support for the Local Property Tax? Voting on School District Budgets in New York, 2003-2010.” *Journal of Education Finance* 36, no. 3 (2011): 294–311.

Wheatley, Vicki. “The Relationship between Components of the Ohio Local School District Report Card and the Outcome of a School Tax Levy.” Ashland University, 2012.

Zimmer, Ron, Richard Buddin, John Jones, and Na Liu. “What Types of School Capital Projects Are Voters Willing to Support?” *Public Financial* 31, no. 1 (2011): 37–55. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5850.2011.00973.x.