Superintendent Q&A: Dr. Don Lifto

This former superintendent shares insights from decades of experience both leading and consulting school referendum campaigns.

Lifto’s career has centered on school referendums. He’s presented at over two dozen conferences since 1993, including national conferences for the School Superintendents Association (AASA), the Association of School Business Officials (ASBO), and the National School Boards Association (NSBA). He’s been published over 20 times in national education journals, and he consulted dozens of districts before becoming director at Baker Tilly, a leading advisory, tax, and assurance firm. Before consulting, Lifto gained his initial experience with bond and levy referendums as an educator. He served as a superintendent in Minnesota in rural, suburban, and intermediate districts for 25 years.

We sat down with Lifto to talk about changes in school tax elections, basic advice for school districts, and controversial bond election strategies.
How have bond elections changed since you started your career?

The key strategies to win are similar, if not almost identical, to what they were 30 years ago. You’re still trying to understand the demographics you’re dealing with, find out who supports you, and get your supporters in the door for the vote. Good campaigns are still canvassing—calling people or doing Internet-based canvassing—basically trying to sort the universe into Yes voters and No voters, and those who are undecided.

The biggest things that have changed are not the strategies, but how you execute them. For example, now, if we call you as part of the canvassing process, before you pick up the phone, we know your name, address, phone number, education level, household income, race, and parental status. We know whether you rent or own, and a half-dozen other demographic markers. By the time you say “hello,” we can see these things in the databases that we acquire to work the election.
Those same databases make it much, much more powerful when you do a feasibility survey, because when you get the results back, you can sort by all those demographic characteristics. So there's a much richer array of data to manage your canvassing and your communications in getting out the vote.

In the last couple years, many of our clients have used geovisual mapping platforms. So after we acquire all these databases and do our canvassing, we've figured out who likes us and who doesn't like us, who votes and who doesn't vote. All of this data is loaded up into mapping systems like GuideK12, so you can sit on your computer and say, I want to talk to everybody in Zone One with these eight characteristics, then hand the map off to your volunteer to go door knocking.

This combination of databases and technology has created opportunities to make campaigning much, much better — and, in my view, give yourself a better chance of being successful.

What is the ideal timeline for a bond campaign?
When we work with a school district to plan a bond referendum, we like a 15-18 month timeline. We find that, everything else being equal, districts who take the long approach are more successful on Election Day.

Districts will typically do a preliminary feasibility survey 12-15 months before they’re considering putting something on the ballot. They find out how people feel about key components of that proposal: whether or not they’re willing to pay for it, and if so, how much they’re willing to pay.

By collecting that information that far ahead of time, they’re able to develop a long-range community engagement campaign. They essentially try to move the ship in whatever direction they feel they need to move it. So if a main component of their proposal was to redo all of the elementary school entrances for safety and security, and they found out that support was tepid—they’d now have a year to move public sentiment.

Then, they’ll come back with what we would call a tracking survey—typically 10-12 questions—to recheck what people think. The board uses that
current information to make a final decision: *Are we going on the ballot? What can we ask for? And at what tax rate?* That process helps achieve alignment between what the school district wants—and its cost—with what the community values and is willing to pay.

**How do school districts know when they need to abandon or postpone a bond?**

If the overwhelming sentiment is negative—like if your feasibility survey shows that 60% of the community isn’t supportive—in most cases, the district is better off to wait and take more time than to go through a referendum that appears to be unwinnable. If you do go that route and lose, then you’re going to be looking at six months to a year of pain and blame before you can get to a stable footing again to give it another try.

In the feasibility surveys that we do, we test real, specific components of a proposal—for example, whether to add an auditorium to the high school or to replace the football field with artificial turf. So if the district sees that 70% of the people are saying “no” on
artificial turf, that doesn’t necessarily mean it won’t be part of the program if indeed that’s what the district needs. But that certainly means that it’s not going to be at the front of the parade when you’re engaging with the community.

If there are a couple of controversial components that are just not getting strong support and the district is concerned that having unpopular elements could drag the whole thing down, you will sometimes see districts split the ballot. In question one, they’ll have the bread and butter, and then in question two—maybe that’s adding gymnasiums to elementary schools or whatever it might be. It’s essentially pulling elements that might drag the proposal down and putting them in that second question.

The success rate on second questions is a lot lower than on first ones, so it’s kind of a toss-up. I probably wouldn’t do that if my data suggested that I had 60% support, even though people aren’t too crazy about the gyms. But if I were looking at data that said it was a coin flip, and people really didn’t like the gyms, I might consider pulling them into a second question.
Can you describe the landscape of state regulations on bond campaigns? Do some states have looser restrictions?

A well-respected communications consultant I have worked with on many campaigns is fond of saying, “It’s got to be on their time and on their dime.” If you’re a school board member, you don’t give up your First Amendment right to free speech when you get elected. But if you’re helping the “Get Out the Vote” committee, you better not be turning in mileage. You better not be duplicating your targeted neighborhood maps in the district’s copy machine.

That probably covers 90% of the statutes across the country that put limitations on what school administrators or school board members can do in support of a campaign. But when you get to a specific state, you’ve got to look at its statutes and make sure there isn’t something else that comes into play. In pretty much all school districts, you also need to look at your school board policies. Are there limitations on use of buildings and grounds? Can the campaign committee have a table at the football game? Are there limitations on use of staff mailboxes? These
aren't necessarily going to be statutory, but they might come from local school board policies.

How serious is the risk? Have you heard of administrators getting into trouble?

In my experience working with school districts on referendums over the past 25-30 years, an election has never been overturned or reversed. No one's ever gone to jail. Generally somebody will make a complaint, whether that’s to the Secretary of State or some other official, depending on how the state election laws are set up. Then, there’s an investigation. Usually it results in someone getting a reprimand or a ticket, in essence, and having to pay a fine. But as I said, I've never seen it result in an overturned election.

The greater risk is when people react to media coverage of what's happened. So if somebody accuses the district of using taxpayer money to persuade people and they file a complaint with the city attorney, any of that PR coverage that happens before people vote is going to be inherently negative, and it certainly won’t help the outcome.
Any time you’ve got organized opposition, whether it’s an individual or taxpayer group, they’re going to be watching everything you’re doing and looking for actions that they think are either illegal or unethical, and then trying to make an issue of it—because that’s going to affect turnout.

Do you have any advice for a district that's facing organized opposition?

If it’s a community member leading that organized opposition, the general advice is to be strategic and thoughtful about who you ask to confront them. Oftentimes the right choice isn’t necessarily the superintendent or a board member. Oftentimes you’re looking for a very well-respected, well-known, trusted person within the community. Let them confront that “No” initiative so people can see someone they know and like and trust making a different point than the organized opposition.

Some superintendents seem wary of reminding No voters about the election. On the other
Hand, we've heard superintendents say that they don't want to run a "sneaky campaign." Which is best?

Early in my career as a superintendent, part of the conversation in the planning did include running an "under-the-radar" election. But in 2019, with social media and the internet and everything else, I don't believe that's an option anymore, even if it were a good idea. Now, notwithstanding that comment, when we're working with a district, we ask, "What kind of a turnout are we expecting? And is a larger turnout going to help you or hurt you?" If there's nothing else on the ballot, we'll see somewhere between 20-30% turnout. But in the November 2020 elections, for example, turnout is probably going to be over 70% in many places.

Think of a school district, for instance, where only 10% of the registered voters are parents. In that case, the larger the turnout, the more difficult it would be to pass the bond because you wouldn't have as many natural advocates.
The largest cities here in Minnesota—Minneapolis and St. Paul—need and want big turnouts, because some majority of their registered voters tend to lean progressive Democrat. So in that case, whatever you can do to increase the turnout—law signs, billboards—is going to help you. But in a suburb where the majority of residents are Republican or fiscally conservative, where only 20% of registered voters are parents, the larger the turnout, the more likely you’re going to lose. So in that particular situation, I would not generally be encouraging signs or billboards, which would likely have the effect of increasing turnout.

So again, do we want a big turnout or do we want a small turnout? What’s the demography of parents versus everybody else? What are the politics of our community? All these factor into whether you’re going to have people standing on the corner waving signs or not.

Have you seen any schools engage young voters particularly well?
Many states have early voting now, and that’s a good way to get young parents to participate. One school I worked with clearly had a situation where they were trying to get young voters in the door. In their failed 2016 campaign, they only had around 120-130 votes. One year later, in a winning bond referendum, they had almost 1,000 early votes. On one of those early voting days, the campaign committee scheduled a petting zoo at a polling site.

Well, a petting zoo draws a certain demographic. The kids were petting the goats and milking the cows, and then parents were grabbed by the ear by a campaign volunteer.

Another district organized a flag football game from around 5-7 p.m. on Election Day outside of a voting location. They recruited teams and had a couple hundred young dads playing a fun game of flag football. Again, the idea was: You’re already here. Now let’s get you in the door to vote before you go home.

I’m not saying any of these are necessarily ideas to replicate. But part of this planning is to understand the voting behaviors of different demographic groups.
within your community, and then to intervene where you need to intervene.

Unfortunately, when you analyze voting frequency, many parents, particularly young ones, are going to be in that worst group. So if you know that, you can quantify how many parent votes are in that group by name, address, and phone number and then essentially sit down and talk strategically: *What are we going to do to get them in the door?* In the absence of a significant effort, you probably get 20% turnout of that group if you’re lucky.

**As a consultant, what red flags do you tend to see?**

If I get a phone call in August asking for help, my first question is, “What’s the date of the election?” And if my call comes in August of 2019 and the date of the election is November of 2019—there’s not much I can do to help. You need time to know what to do.

Not having the superintendent fully engaged would be another red flag—or having a split board, where half want to move ahead on Plan X and half on Plan Y.
The bond process is demanding physically, mentally, and emotionally. Do you have any advice for administrators struggling to keep up their stamina?

Oftentimes surviving and doing well in that demanding environment involves really smart delegation of authority. In some cases, the district is large enough that the superintendent can delegate some of their teaching and learning responsibilities to a lieutenant so there's time to concentrate on that referendum. Or, just the opposite: to have somebody internally be the main person driving the referendum planning rather than the superintendent.

To learn more about Dr. Lifto’s perspective on school referendums, check out his most recent book School Tax Elections: Planning for Success in the New Normal.
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