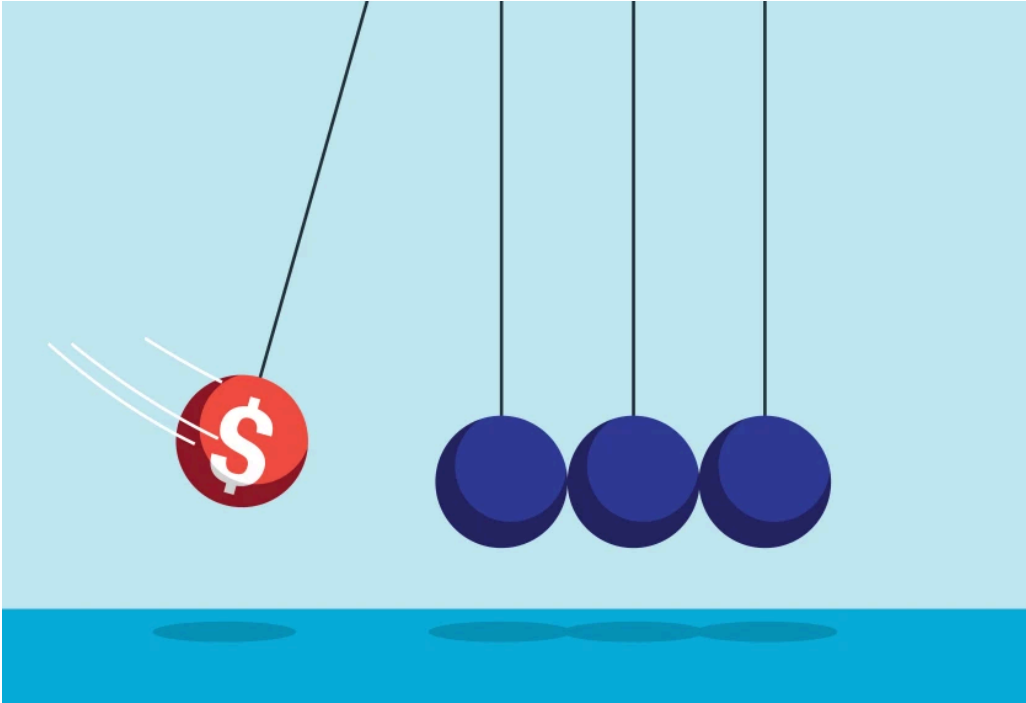


How to Build Voter Support for School Bonds: 5 Tips



By Caitlynn Peetz — May 09, 2024

5 min read



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Securing voters' support for school bond measures can be tricky. But developing deep, meaningful connections with the community well in advance can make a world of difference, according to three superintendents who have in recent years successfully secured bonds for their districts worth tens of millions of dollars and, in one case, more than a billion.

Most states require school districts to seek voter approval before issuing bonds to pay for expensive facilities projects like HVAC upgrades and roof replacements, as well as for technology tools, measures to improve compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, and heightened security.

And as many districts come to terms with smaller revenue pools as pandemic-relief aid winds down, and with few alternative sources of capital funding, more could turn to bond measures to fund important projects.

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It can become especially tricky as district leaders try to share information they feel makes the proposals necessary without advocating support, as they are generally prohibited by law from campaigning for a bond measure.

Three superintendents who have successfully navigated the process in recent years suggest district leaders be accessible, transparent, and responsive to questions and concerns.

We've boiled their advice down to these five tips for district leaders.

Form meaningful relationships before you make a big ask

The work to pass a bond measure starts long before the proposal actually lands on the ballot, the superintendents said.

District leaders should constantly work on establishing and nurturing relationships with community members and local groups, especially before they ask for public support and additional tax money, said Kenny Rodrequez, the superintendent in Grandview, Mo., south of Kansas City, where voters in April approved a \$50 million bond. People are more likely to back a bond measure if they already know and trust district leaders, he said.

"You want to try and be out there with people, building trust, supporting their causes and events when I can, so that when you do have to go to them and ask for something, they're more apt to say, 'Well, yeah, you've been a great supporter of ours, and we would love to support you and your organization, as well,'" Rodrequez said.

Matt Montgomery, the superintendent in Lake Forest, Ill., said building trust is particularly important now because trust in government agencies has dwindled in recent years, and school districts haven't been immune as pandemic-related tensions gave way to cultural and political debates that have played out before school boards.

Montgomery's community, north of Chicago, narrowly approved a \$106 million bond last year.

“It wasn’t like we were starting with a huge ‘trust bank,’” he said. “We had to keep putting deposits in the bank so that people would build up their trust in us and know we were going to give them timely, accurate information when they needed it.”

Be upfront and transparent about what the money will fund and how much it will cost taxpayers

It’s not enough to simply tell the community how much money the proposed bond is for or the general size of the tax increase across the board, according to the superintendents. Community members want specifics about how the measure will affect them individually. It can be helpful to create a website or other resource that shows how much properties of specific values could expect to pay if the proposal passes, Rodrequez said.

Also, districts can consider creating a “living, breathing” website with frequently asked questions on which district staff can respond to common questions and continue to add to it as more come up, Montgomery said.

Overcommunicate

When it comes to the right amount of communication about a bond proposal, there’s no limit.

In Illinois, Montgomery said his district relied on a “steady drumbeat of communication” prior to its bond vote. That included mailers, near-constant speaking engagements and forums, and videos about projects the money would underwrite.

In Missouri, Rodrequez said he hosted several small-scale forums where people could ask him questions, voice concerns, and get real-time responses from district leaders.

He also hosted events on Facebook Live, which allowed busy parents and community members to participate without carving out time to travel. Those time-crunched community members still had the opportunity to submit questions and get live responses.

“I always call it ‘stump the superintendent,’ because we wanted them to just lay out all of their questions and get a good idea of what the concerns are,” Rodrequez said.

Rodrequez acknowledged that there are no surefire ways to get “yes” votes, and that every community is different, but he said building trusting relationships can help create an environment in which people are willing to hear out ideas.

Don’t forget voters who don’t have children in the school system

When they're seeking voter support for a bond package, districts aren't just appealing to parents.

Many local residents don't have children in the school system, but they vote on bond and levy issues, so showing them how they also benefit from the investment can make a difference, said Sharon Contreras, the former superintendent in Guilford County, N.C.

In her community, that involved inviting business leaders into schools to assess conditions for themselves and explaining how those could influence potential employees' and businesses' decisions to locate in the area and affect local home values.

"We had to convince people who aren't directly tied to the schools that this mattered to the vibrancy of the community," said Contreras, whose district approved a \$1.7 billion bond in 2022 that was, at the time, the largest school bond ever passed in North Carolina.

Be visible when you succeed and celebrate progress

The work doesn't end when the ballots are counted.

When a bond issue is successful at the ballot box, it's important for leaders to show community members they made a good investment, the superintendents said.

"Once [the measures] passed, it became, 'Now, we'd better put our money where our mouth is,' because if in a few years we need to do this again, we'd better show people it was worthwhile," Rodrequez said.

The district can provide routine updates about projects through community messages and updates to project websites. It can also conduct tours of new and upgraded buildings, hold groundbreaking and ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and share stories with local media.

Montgomery's district in Illinois is creating a new website to show how bond-funded projects are progressing—from the bids the district receives to the final product. The district plans to update its new dashboard frequently to show what percentage of each project is complete, how much money has been spent, and how much debt the district has paid off.

