

The Superintendent

JAMES H. VANSICVER

After the Vote

Mentioning the word *referendum* will send a chill down the backs of most school administrators and board members. With the hope of soliciting public favor for the vote, they scurry through their communities seeking out volunteers to serve on advisory committees.

The agenda of an advisory committee is most often laden with concepts such as *communication*, *input*, *ownership*, and *promotion*. Committee members will be asked to communicate the school system's needs to the public, solicit input from community members (which will develop "ownership") and serve as spokespersons for the project. (After all, the community expects the school officials to try to sell it, not their neighbors!)

After months of process, the vote takes place. Win or lose, the advisory committee is sure to go the way of the dinosaur. And what of the virtues of communication, input, ownership, and promotion? In the minds of most of the school district's public, the perception is that educators feel that those ideals outlive their usefulness if continued beyond the vote date.

That would be a major error on the part of the school officials! There will not be only one referendum. School votes are a regular happening in most school systems. Whether they are a function of school board member elections, bond issues, or operating expense questions, the fact is that the citizenry regularly pull the switch in the voting booth on school issues.

If the school district's staff are to win and retain the trust and confidence of the community, the concepts of communication, input, ownership, and promotion must be a part of an ongoing dialogue. The level of that trust and confidence will be reflected in any and all future elections. And what bet-

ter way to accomplish that goal than to continue the life of the advisory committee after the successful vote is counted?

That's exactly what officials in Lake Forest School District (Harrington, Delaware) did—well, almost. Actually, there was no formal school-organized advisory committee prior to the referendum vote for the bond issue. Members of the public organized themselves (with a little help from the educators) and made possible the successful vote. The district's citizenry had approved the sale of bonds to fund \$4.5 million for the construction of classrooms, renovation of roofs, im-

provements of heating systems, additions of provisions for the handicapped, and the construction of a new central business office. The members of the Lake Forest Board of Education decided to form the committee after learning that the bond issue had passed. They wanted to make good on their promises of communicating regularly with community members, gathering input to make better decisions, giving citizens ownership of the school district, and promoting the needs and accomplishments of the schools at every opportunity. More directly, they wanted to make sure that the voters had knowledge of decisions



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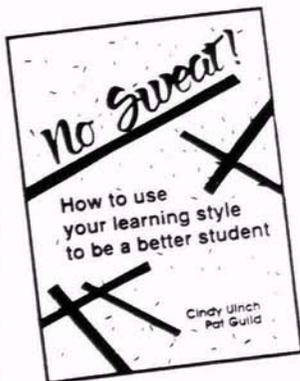
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regarding the building program and had a vehicle for influencing those decisions. It was imperative, they felt, to make the best decisions possible in spending the taxpayers' dollars.

Advertisements were placed in the local newspapers asking for volunteers. A series of board interviews left the committee with nine members whose experiences and backgrounds make them excellent choices for the job. One had been a spokesperson for the referendum and had established a substantial communications network in the community. Several others are tradesmen with experience in various aspects of construction. Still others work with the state or with agencies that give them access to knowledge and resources regarding building projects. There are representatives from each of the district's three major communities.

Two members of the board of education volunteered to serve as liaisons to the committee. The superintendent, assistant for administrative services, and supervisor of buildings and grounds also attend the monthly meetings. To further promote communication, the committee chairperson makes a report at each monthly board of education meeting.

In truth, the committee *has* slowed down the construction process. The architect now meets with committee members; they tour construction sites, review specifications before bids, and comment on bids as well. So we have an additional level of bureaucracy with which to deal relative to our building programs. However, our decisions have been much better, and the virtues of communication, input, ownership, and promotion have not been lost in Lake Forest School District. □

James H. VanSciver is Superintendent, Lake Forest School District, Harrington, DE 19952.

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