



Tips for Winning Your Next School Election

A Banach, Banach & Cassidy White Paper

Everyone believes that education is essential. Nearly everyone thinks that children are “the future” and that we must invest in them. Given these beliefs, why do school finance elections fail?

People vote for or against school ballot issues for myriad reasons. That is what makes every election unique. Yet, those school districts that win at the polls exhibit some common characteristics. The characteristics and related tips are the subject of this white paper from Banach, Banach & Cassidy.

Build a Support Base

School leaders know that most voters in school elections decide how to vote long before Election Day. When they cast their ballot, they exercise one of two choices—*yes* or *no*.

School leaders also understand that campaigns don’t win elections. Campaigns harness and deliver support that is already there.

And where does support come from? It results from doing good work, engaging the community, and ensuring their constituencies are informed. In short, when school people compromise on engagement and communication with constituents, they build barriers to a successful election.

Tip One: Think long-term. Build a support base for your school district by doing excellent work, engaging people in developing a vision for your school district, and communicating effectively. Use campaigns to reinforce your support base so you can tap it for *yes* votes when people vote.

Know Who Will Vote

As school leaders, it is crucial to be well-informed about the categories of people who will vote in your school election. If we called a school election for two o’clock this afternoon, three categories of people would show up—yes voters, no voters, and undecided voters. The same categories of people will appear at the school election you have called for next year.

The challenge is determining how many of each category are represented in your school district. Once that is done, the work that needs to be done is straightforward: Reinforce yes voters and move the undecided into the yes voter column.

Tip Two: Know how many yes voters you need to win. Find them and get them to the polls on Election Day.

Know When People Will Vote

More people are casting absentee ballots or taking opportunities to vote early. If that's the case in your school district—and our research indicates that it is—your election outcome could be solidified six weeks before Election Day.

Tip Three: Your database should tell you who is likely to vote before Election Day. Develop a strategy to reach these people at least six weeks before Election Day.

Know People's Perceptions

Do you know what people think about when they think about your school district? Do you know what they like and don't like about your school district? Do you understand what school information they want and how they want it delivered? Unless you have completed a survey, odds are you are just guessing at the answers to the above questions.

Perceptions are important to understand. You can have great schools, but if the perception is that you have mediocre schools, guess what? You have mediocre schools.

If public perception is that the new high school you plan to build is too expensive, guess what? Your election may be headed south.

Tip Four: Understand that subjective perceptions usually count for more than objective information. Get a sound assessment of perceptions in your school district. Then, keep it up to date.

Attend to the Process

You are not doing an adequate marketing job if all you do is put up a billboard. You are not doing an effective communication job if you only publish four newsletters each year. Marketing, communication, and school elections are all processes. Each process begins when you decide to do something, and none of them has an ending.

An election campaign is not a single thing or event. It is a complex process that must be goal-oriented and flexible enough to accommodate changes in the campaign environment.

Tip Five: Process requires people and a plan. Winners know what they want from their “three Ps”—their plan, process, and people. Do not get trapped into believing that your campaign ends on Election Day. (That is the day your next election begins, and all your processes recycle.)

Timing is Everything

When do you create an election-related informational tab on your website? If you do an election-related “fact card,” when do you do it? When should you mail campaign information? When will you reach various target audiences with direct mail, social media, and ads? If you use yard signs, when do you put them up and take them down?

Tip Six: Develop a strategy-related timeline that indicates who will do what and when. Carefully time everything. (Experienced jumpers do not pull the parachute ripcord as they exit the plane... and don't plan to pull it after hitting the ground!)

Commitment is Critical

Winning school districts engage their constituents in creating a vision, and they are committed to it. They know where they are headed and have a plan to get there.

The same dogged determination is required for election success. Have a clear understanding of your election communication priorities, and take the necessary steps to conclude your election campaign with a victory celebration.

Tip Seven: Know where your school district is headed and how the election relates to a commonly held vision. Send a strong signal that says this is the most important thing on the agenda.

Citizens Lead Campaigns

Citizens should be out front in a campaign, but “knowledgeables” need to map out the parade route. How much do most citizens know about conducting election campaigns, systematically assessing public perceptions, and producing communications that build understanding? Citizens can and should be out front in school elections, but they need guidance to keep them moving in the right direction. That is why politicians rely on a bevy of experts—from campaign consultants to media specialists to pollsters to people who stage events.

Tip Eight: Citizens should be the out-front leaders of school campaigns, but they should receive the guidance and support needed to be effective.

Facts and Logic Don't Sell

Campaign messages must be relevant to the voter. School leaders sometimes believe that this means voters should be barraged with facts, and the campaign should appeal to the voter's sense of logic. But, by themselves, facts and logic do not sell!

We know from introductory psychology that most people make unconscious decisions (and try to justify their choices consciously, sometimes using facts and logic). Winning campaigns target voters' hearts, stomachs, *and* heads.

While election facts and financial logic may provide the foundation for the ballot issue, the message should become more emotional as election day approaches.

Tip Nine: Make sure your statistics, pie charts, and architectural drawings convey a brief, easily understood message that is relevant to voters. If you need help doing this, seek it.

Execute the Plan

A great plan is not helpful unless it is executed. Winners organize to execute the campaign plan in the high-pressure, turbulent environment that characterizes most elections.

If something cannot be done, it should not be in the plan. If it is in the plan, everyone connected with the campaign should believe it will be done.

Tip Ten: Put your campaign in the hands of one or two people. Give them authority, responsibility, *and* the support they need.

Stay Loose

A famous Prussian general said, "No battle plan survives the first contact with the enemy". The same can be said for a finance campaign informational plan. The odds are good that you will need to make changes as your campaign unfolds. Organize to do this.

If your message is about science labs, but voters are concerned about playgrounds, you will have to adjust your message. If you plan a heavy communication initiative using newspapers and find that only ten percent of the people in your town read newspapers, it is time to adjust your strategy. Know how, when, and if you will respond if anonymous "concerned citizens" surprise you with a negative social media message or robo calls before the election.

Tip Eleven: Develop a rapid response system to support the campaign coordinators. Anticipate unforeseen events and take any necessary steps to keep the campaign on track.

Know Your Targets

A community college is planning to build a new arts and science center. To whom should the campaign be targeted? Students? Parents of students? Alums? Public school parents? All these targets seem logical, but in the case of one of our clients, they proved wrong. The most support for the construction project came from *preschool* parents. The campaign strategy was adjusted to accommodate this survey finding, and bonds for the construction project were approved on Election Day.

Tip Twelve: Know your targets. Know who supports your issue. Then, ensure you have enough supporters in your target audience to win, even if only half of them turn out on Election Day.

Face-to-Face is Best

People long for personal contact. Every technological connection—it seems—has been enhanced. We are connected like never before. Yet, we miss the human connections we once enjoyed.

This is related to election research, which indicates that *most people vote for something because someone asks them to vote for it*. Do not skimp on personal contact with community members, especially the people your campaign targets. Send them postcards and letters. Connect with them on social media. Phone them on election day with a reminder to vote. And thank them personally when you win.

Tip Thirteen: Make sure members of key target audiences are connected to you one-on-one.

Don't Get Silly

Campaigns are exhausting. In the final few weeks, there is a tendency to do three bad things: Bad 1: Give up on executing elements of the campaign plan because everyone is worn out, stressed, and “pooped.” Bad 2: Copy something that you heard worked in another school district. (If something worked elsewhere, it should have been assessed to determine if it would benefit your campaign, and—if so—it should have been included in your original strategy!) Bad 3: Do something stupid, like driving through neighborhoods with a sound truck. We have even heard well-intentioned citizens suggest skywriting on Election Day.

Tip Fourteen: Do not give up until you cross the finish line, and do not end your campaign by doing something that doesn't make sense or is simply silly.

Will these tips make you a winner? There are no guarantees. But one thing is sure: If you attend to the suggestions above, the odds are better that you will be standing in the winner's circle on Election Day.

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