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VOTER APATHY:
WHY DOES IT EXIST AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO OVERCOME IT?

by
Margaret F. Meehan

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
At
Rowan University
June 28, 2004

Approved by

Dr. Robert W. Kern

Date Approved 6/30/04

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ABSTRACT

Margaret F. Meehan

VOTER APATHY: WHY DOES IT EXIST AT THE SCHOOL ELECTION LEVEL
AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO OVERCOME IT?

2003/04

Dr. Robert W. Kern

Master of Arts in School Administration

The purpose of this study was to ascertain why the stakeholders in the educational process do not participate in the annual school election and to identify and implement techniques that would motivate these stakeholders to go to the polls.

The population of this study consisted of the direct stakeholders in the annual school elections of the Washington Township School District. A disc containing a listing of the individuals who voted in the April 15, 2003, school election was obtained from the Gloucester County Board of Elections. A disc containing a listing of employees who share one of the six zip codes assigned to Washington Township, Gloucester County, New Jersey, was obtained. These two files were then matched up to ascertain how many school district employees who live within the boundaries of the township actually voted. An interview was requested from everyone who did not vote in the last election and from the PTO Presidents' Council. However, further study is needed to ascertain which strategy brought the voters to the polls.

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The intern would like to thank her college mentor, Robert W. Kern, Ed.D., of Rowan University, and Thomas J. Flemming, the Superintendent of Schools of the Washington Township School District for sharing their time and knowledge, not only through this internship, but also through their professional working relationships over the last ten years. The intern would also like to express her gratitude to her friend, Elaine Alestra, for her assistance and encouragement through this program. The intern would also like to thank the individuals who volunteered their time to partake in the interview process.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

New Jersey school districts, as well as school districts across the country, face a myriad of problems such as meeting state and federal standards; providing education for a spectrum of children ranging from special needs to gifted; providing for social services once performed by other agencies; i.e., counseling for drugs, divorce, death, daycare, etc.; providing medical services; and in some cases, providing the only nourishing meal the child will receive. The current economic climate of the country has left state and federal governments facing multi-billion-dollar deficits. This has left all entities that rely on governmental funding to struggle for every available dollar. New Jersey is one of seven states that face an even greater challenge; state law requires that they obtain voter approval for their annual budget, even if it is within the cap restrictions established by state law.

Hough (2000) indicates that voter turnout on Election Day has been steadily falling since the 1960s. The annual school election determines the amount of local taxes that may be raised for the ensuing school year, along with board of education members who will set policies and procedures for the school district to operate within. The stakeholders in this election would be the parents of the students and employees who reside in the particular town. Statistics have shown that over 40 percent of these stakeholders do not participate in the process. It was the intern's intention to identify why voter apathy has been endemic to the annual school election and to determine ways to overcome it.

Focus of Study

This study focused on the reasons for voter apathy in America. An attempt was made to identify why those who have a vested interest in a successful budget choose not to support the budget through the election process. This study was focused primarily on the Washington Township School District, Gloucester County, New Jersey, and the eligible voters in the Township of Washington. Research was conducted to ascertain if there are any viable strategies that may be employed by the Washington Township School District that have not been utilized in the past. Interviews summarized in Tables 3, 4, and 5 were conducted with employees and parents, respectively. These interviews will attempt to determine the cause for voter apathy within the school district. Once a basis has been established, strategies will be implemented in an attempt to overcome the existing indifference.

This study when originally planned was to include the issuance of questionnaires to the staff and parents who live in the Township of Washington; however, the Washington Township Education Association (WTEA) that represents the teachers and secretaries worked without a contract since the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year. Morale was at an all-time low. Staff refused to participate in any activity in which they did not get paid. Teachers backed out of commitments they made to their fellow union members who were working on their masters' degrees. It was determined that any responses to a questionnaire would have been influenced by the lack of a contract and negotiation strategies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to ascertain why the stakeholders in the educational process (the parents and staff) avoided participation in the annual school election and to identify and implement techniques that motivated these stakeholders to vote. It was hoped that this study could be useful to Washington Township School District and to other suburban, predominately white; middle-class school districts by identifying factors that promoted or hindered a positive budget election, as well as, strategies that supported a positive election.

Definitions

CEIFA - Comprehensive Education Improvement and Financing Act – the latest funding formula used by the State of New Jersey to determine funding for public school districts.

Type II School District - A school district whose board of education members are elected by the public.

Operating School District - A school district which runs an educational program for all or part of the resident children in the district.

Non-Operating School District – A school district which tuitions out all of its resident pupils.

Stakeholder – The individual who has a vested interest or stands to gain in the process.

Limitations of the Study

The research to follow revealed that there are numerous reasons why individuals choose not to vote. School district budget elections studied were unique in that they ask individuals to increase the amount of real estate taxes they will pay, rather than elected officials, which is the case in most other elections. According to the New Jersey School Boards Association, New Jersey has 615 school districts of which 593 are operating and 22 are non-operating. This differs from states like Maryland and Delaware who utilize

countywide school districts. Pursuant to their department of education websites, Maryland and Delaware have 24 and 26 school districts, respectively. Countywide school districts geographically cover more square miles than individual municipal school districts as in New Jersey; thus, comprising more diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. This study only compared school districts within the State of New Jersey with comparable socioeconomic and racial composition as Washington Township School District. This study was limited to the views of the eligible voters in the Township of Washington, Gloucester County, as they pertain to the annual school district election. The intern believed that the numerous changes in the State's funding formula for public schools had an effect on the public's trust of school systems within the State of New Jersey. Therefore, this study provided a brief description of the current funding formula used by the State of New Jersey to provide aid to public school districts. It identified the effects of this formula on the residents of the Township of Washington; however, it did not elaborate on the inherent problems with the funding formula nor attempt to offer a solution.

The Washington Township Education Association worked without a contract for over six months. Negotiations between the union and the Board were antagonistic. The intern was an administrator who sat at the negotiation table; therefore, this limited what was able to be included in this study due to State code governing officials' conduct involving negotiations. Information that the union released to its membership was distorted, which enraged members of the union. Job actions were imposed and included such items as refusal to attend Back-to-School-Night and refusal to write letters of recommendation for high school seniors.

Endemic to any institution was the fact that public opinion turns without any notice or internal cause. It was common for articles to appear on the front page of the newspaper that contained distorted facts of actual events. Retractions or corrections of the same story were buried in the back of the paper. It was noted that the stakeholder of the Washington Township School District would drive the results of this study.

Setting of the Study

Washington Township, Gloucester County, was once a predominately agricultural community. Slowly and consistently this agricultural community changed to the largest bedroom community (single-family homes) in the county. As noted in the New Jersey abstract of ratables (2003), the Washington Township, Gloucester County, New Jersey, tax base is primarily from single-family structures with very little commercial ratables.

Table 1

Statistics from the 2000 US Census

Description	Statistic
Population	47,114
Racial Composition (single race):	
White	90.2%
Black or African American	4.9%
Asian	3.3%
Other Single and Multi-Race	1.6%
Education	
High School Diploma	32.9%
Some College, No Degree	19.0%
Associate Degree	7.6%
Bachelor Degree	21.0%
Graduate or Professional Degree	8.8%
Housing Occupancy	
Owner-Occupied Housing Units	13,614
Renter-Occupied Housing Units	1,995
Average Household Size of Owner-Occupied	3.12

Average Household Size of Renter-Occupied	2.22
Sex	
Male	48.5%
Female	51.5%
Median Household Income (in dollars)	\$66,546
Square Mileage	25.1

Source: http://www.wik.pedia.org/wiki/United_States_Census_Bureau (9/14/03)

In 1975 the State of New Jersey implemented a district factor grouping (DFG) system for all school districts within the state. The DFG is a composite created using statistical procedure to group districts based on the following indices: income, occupation, and percent of population with no high school diploma, percent of population with some college, population density, poverty, and unemployment. The state has assigned the DFG of GH, on a scale of A to J (with J being the wealthiest of districts) to Washington Township School District. This rating represents an upper middle-class community. From these statistics, one would surmise that Washington Township is a white middle-class community. As indicated in Appendix A, the district has only passed two budgets in the last ten years.

The Washington Township School District is comprised of an early childhood center, six elementary schools, three middle schools and one high school. The state fall report for 2001-2002 (May 2003) reports that the district is comprised of 964 certified staff members and 531.5 non-certified staff members. Table 2 below lists the total annual budget and related student enrollment:

Table 2

Total Annual Budget and Related Enrollment

Fiscal Year	Total Annual Budget	Student Enrollment
2002-2003	\$106,881,694	9,852.5
2001-2002	\$ 98,571,181	9,719.5
2000-2001	\$ 91,936,193	9,488.5
1999-2000	\$ 85,361,048	9,305.0

Source: Washington Township School District's Annual Budget Documents, May 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003 and New Jersey Applications for State School Aid, October 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001.

The State of New Jersey's website revealed that the school district's comparative cost-per-pupil remains under the state average, while test scores remain above the state average. The Washington Township School District's curriculum guides (December 2003) noted that the district's curriculum complies with the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. The district offers a variety of technology education, business education, and family consumer science, as well as diverse courses in sciences, mathematics, social sciences, and other core subject areas designed to meet the needs and interests of a large student body to prepare their students for college and the workplace. This curriculum includes 12 advanced placement offerings, an SAT preparation course, four world languages, a middle-level exploratory arts program, a comprehensive music and art education program, and a broad range of athletic and extracurricular activities. The Washington Township School District has received numerous awards for its music and technology programs, as well as specialized programs such as the Elementary Multi-

age Program at Thomas Jefferson Program. This program combines regular education students in two grade levels (either grades 1 and 2 or grades 3 and 4) along with special education students.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this study was organized in the following manner: Review of the Literature, Design of the Study, Presentation of Research Findings, and Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The Chester Taxpayers for Public Education state: “New Jersey is one of only seven states that vote on school budgets and most of those seven only vote if the budget exceeds the cap allowable by the state.” New Jersey State Statutes (N.J.S.A.) 18A:22-33, Gann Law Books (2003), requires ...the legal voters of the district shall determine at the election, by a majority vote of those voting upon the proposition, the sum or sums, not exceeding those stated in the notice of the election, to be raised by special district tax for said purposes, in the district during the ensuing school year. N.J.S.A. 19:60-1a states, “An annual school election shall be held in each Type II district on the third Tuesday in April,” and N.J.S.A. 19:60-1b states “All school elections shall be by ballot.” The only taxes voters in New Jersey have the opportunity to vote on are school district and fire district budgets; all other governmental agencies/political subdivisions are not dependent upon voter approval. To throw salt into the wounds, the election often coincides with the annual Internal Revenue Service income tax filing date of April 15. Traditionally, voter turnout for school elections is significantly lower than that of the general election as evidenced from data in Appendix B.

Review of the Problem

In December 1996 the State of New Jersey enacted the Comprehensive Education and Improvement and Financing Act (CEIFA). This was the answer to a 20-year-old court order to provide adequate funding for all children within the state. This law provides

standards that must be achieved by the school districts and attempts to distribute the state aid based on the local municipalities' ability to pay. CEIFA establishes a ceiling on the maximum a public school district may raise its budget. To oversimplify a complex calculation, a public school district may raise its budget 3 percent over the previous year's base with some statutory adjustments such as increased enrollment, hazardous busing, extraordinary costs for special education, increase in capital outlay, and additional costs for opening a new facility. Communities with little or no business and industry have seen school tax rates skyrocket. Salary increases are averaging 4.65 percent across the state, health benefit increases are in excess of 20 percent, and utilities are averaging 8 percent; yet the district is limited to a 3 percent cap. Many services to the students have been reduced or eliminated completely before the budget is even presented to the voters. Frustration of school administrators is at an all time high as they wrestle to bring their budgets in under cap in the current economic climate only to have them defeated at the polls, which results in more reductions and elimination of services. Individuals opposed to increased taxes have organized to get similar constituents to the polls to defeat the budget. Yet those who benefit from a passing budget are apathetic to the process. The intern was completely astounded when she saw and heard an employee stand up at a public board meeting and state that she voted "no" on the budget because her real estate taxes were too high.

Puriefoy (2000) states:

A Public Education Network poll found that Americans believe that public schools play an essential role in their communities and that support for public schools and the sentiment for greater involvement are consistent across all ages,

income levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds, among those with and without school-age children. People want to invest their time, not just spend it. They look at time as something to be invested wisely that will make a difference in the lives of young people.

School principals have stated in budget review meetings that the majority of parents in the Washington Township School District are extremely active in their children's lives. The district never had difficulty enlisting volunteers for various activities.

The Washington Township School District experienced significant budget cuts in the last ten years. Traditionally, the Board of Education and administration have tried to protect the operations of the classroom. As a result of the April 2003 budget defeat instruction was impacted again. Classrooms were impacted by the reduction of the transitional first grade program; the elimination of five existing teaching positions, an increase in class size in the elective courses at the high school; a reduction in classroom supplies and library books; and the elimination of specialized programs such as family math and science. Although these cuts may be significant to those directly involved, it has not resulted in an outcry from the public to have them replaced. Milbrath (1965) states: "Many who have studied nonvoters in partisan elections suggest that the reason qualified voters fail to vote is that they see no connection between their single votes and any meaningful change in the areas of life that they feel are important (p.51). This appears to be evident in the district's annual election.

Review on Major Concepts Related to the Problem

Hatley and Ritter (1981), in their study on the Prediction of Voting Behavior in Local School District Financial Referendum, found that when the vote is for a "yes" or "no" in

a school financial election, it appears that the school officials and campaign strategies can have a definite effect on the vote. Their study revealed that attitudes significantly affect a positive or negative outcome and that school officials are in a unique position to formulate these attitudes.

People for the American Way conducted a study entitled "The Vanishing Voter and the Crisis in American Democracy; New Strategies for Reversing the Decline in Voter Participation". This study believes that the two-step process is primarily responsible for the decline. Most states require that an individual register to vote weeks in advance of the actual election. It is recommended that legislation be enacted to allow for same day registration. People for the American Way conducted youth focus groups which revealed a high degree of apathy. Participants believed that they were good citizens because they did not do anything wrong, but they were skeptical of the political process. It was obvious from these discussions that the adult world has not provided these youths with the true meaning of being a citizen in a democracy. This study stressed the importance of implementing a registration campaign.

Heitzeg (1987) discusses ways to use technology to win your next financial election. He believes that you have to sell the "sizzle not the steak." His strategies are as follows:

The "Amway Plan".

This is a pyramid sales concept. Person A contacts ten people and convinces them of the wisdom of a "yes" vote and to sell them on the idea of contacting ten of their friends and neighbors to do the same. If this is done, the initial 10 votes turn to 100 and then to 1000.

Focus on Registered Voters.

Separate those who are registered with children in the schools from those that are not registered, and focus on them. Data files from the Board of Elections and the school district can be manipulated to identify this population. Teams are created that will reach out to the population identified.

Use of Word Processing.

Word processing can be used year round to create a positive attitude toward the school system. It can also be used at election time to personalize messages through the use of mail merge.

Use of Telephone Dialers.

Computerized telephone dialers can be used to remind your targeted population to vote on Election Day.

Heitzeg (1987) believes that the above strategies should be implemented by the citizens and staff to be most effective.

The United States Department of Commerce News (February 27, 2002) reports that the voting rate of registered voters rose sharply in the 2000 election from 82 percent in the 1996 election to 86 percent in the 2000 election; yet the registration rate dropped slightly from 71 percent to 70 percent.

In Appendix C, voter turnout rate is extremely higher for the federal and state elections. One could surmise that this is a result of large campaign budgets expended to get candidates elected. New Jersey school districts are not permitted to spend money to influence the outcome of the budget vote.

Chapter 3

Design of Study

General Description of the Resource Design

Originally, the intern planned to develop two different questionnaires to be directed to the two groups who are stakeholders in the annual school election. These stakeholders are the parents of the students receiving an education within the Washington Township School District and the employees who reside in the Township of Washington. As noted earlier, the strained climate resulting from teachers and secretaries working without a new contract necessitated a change in the design of study. The intern believed that once the contract was ratified, the current climate would improve, and parents and staff would be more willing to volunteer their time and opinions. A tentative agreement was reached between the Board of Education and the WTEA on January 8, 2004. Both sides reached agreement on the salary guides on February 1, 2004. The union ratified the tentative agreement on February 26, 2004; and the Board voted in favor of the tentative agreement on March 1, 2004. Therefore, the intern altered the original plan so that she would conduct interviews, after both sides ratified the contract, with employees who did not vote in the last school election and ask presidents of the various parent/teacher organizations if she could interview parents at or after one of their meetings. The intern, not wanting to embarrass the employees, planned to not inform them that she knew they did not vote in the last election. She felt that doing so might invoke a negative reaction by having them vote “no” on the budget; however, she believed that this group would have the most to offer as they appear to be apathetic to the process. Interviews began with

statistics of election results from previous school elections and federal and state elections. Appendixes B and C contain copies of the statistics used. The intern made this statement and asked the following questions to the participants that it is clear from the statistics that voter apathy exists, why do you feel people choose not to vote? She then steered the conversation to the school election. Noting that the participants' responses may very well lead to additional questions being asked, she would try to ascertain why there was a low voter turnout for the school elections and what these individuals felt could be done to change the voter turnout. To initiate the later discussion, she planned to inform them of strategies that the school employed in the past. A listing of these strategies is available in Appendix D. Then using these responses, along with the review of the literature, the intern would implement strategies that would impel stakeholders to vote on Election Day.

Description of the Development of the Research Instrument

Election results from federal, state, and local school elections were obtained to show the participants that Americans are apathetic to the voting process and do not partake of their right to have a say on how the various levels of government are run. Questions will be developed to engage the participants in an open discussion to ascertain why people do not vote and what would make them want to vote. These statistics and questions can be found in Appendixes B and C and Tables 3, 4, and 5.

Description of the Sample and the Sampling Technique

The population of this study consisted of the direct stakeholders in the annual school elections of the Washington Township School District who were eligible to vote. This included parents of students who partake in the educational system and the employees who work for the school district and reside in the township.

A disc containing a listing of the individuals who voted in the April 15, 2003, school election was obtained from the Gloucester County Board of Elections. A disc containing a listing of employees who share one of the six zip codes assigned to Washington Township, Gloucester County, New Jersey, was obtained. This listing was verified by the Washington Township transportation manager to identify if the address was within the boundaries of the Township of Washington. Any address not within the boundaries was deleted. These two files were then matched up to ascertain how many school district employees who live within the boundaries of the township actually voted. This resulted in 916 resident employees of the Washington Township School District, of which 645 voted and 271 did not vote.

A letter, Appendix E, was sent to all 271 employees who did not participate in the April 15, 2003, election requesting an interview on the topic of voter apathy. Forty-seven employees responded as follows:

- Six would like to help, but their schedules are much too hectic to fit this in.
- Three had a Sewell address, but they actually resided in Mullica Hill Township--not Washington Township.
- Thirty-eight employees agreed to an interview, but the intern could not match up schedules with six; therefore, only thirty-two were interviewed (11.8% of the total population).

Additionally, a letter, Appendix F, was sent to the president of the parent-teacher organization's council requesting to speak at their monthly meeting. It was the consensus of the group that meeting with the parents would generate a negative effect. The rationale

for this decision is discussed later in Chapter 4. Therefore, parent feedback was limited to the PTO presidents' council.

Description of the Data-Collection Approach

Voting statistics regarding recent elections was obtained from the United States Census Bureau and the Gloucester County Board of Elections. Letters requesting an interview were sent to all individuals within the sample. The intern took a direct and basic approach and limited the questions to three; she recorded the comments from the participants.

Description of the Analysis

The intern grouped like responses to the questions to determine if any common themes existed. From this process she drew her own conclusions to the questions that were posed. After obtaining permission from the Superintendent of Schools and after compiling the response to the questions, the intern selected strategies for implementation from the responses and review of the literature that might bring the stakeholders to the polls.

Chapter 4

Presentation of the Research Findings

Upon completion of the interviews, the intern compiled the 32 responses and grouped them into common themes. The following are the results obtained by the interview process – question by question.

Table 3

Results of Question 1: Why do people choose not to vote?

Description	Quantity
Nonvoters are too busy to fit this into their lives.	12
Nonvoters' votes do not count.	8
People forget.	3
Nonvoters are apathetic and lazy--voting is an effort.	3
Political parties decide everything.	3
People are focused on their own lives.	3
Nonvoters live in a country where things are not tough for us—did not have to work for freedom.	2
Nonvoters don't care.	2
We have freedom in this country; therefore, there is no fear of retaliation.	1
People do not have enough information to make an educated decision.	1
People do not have a sense of ownership in the government.	1
Nonvoters are not raised with the importance of voting.	1
The importance of voting is not taught in schools.	1
Nonvoters don't know why.	1
Nonvoters don't want to get involved in politics.	1

Table 4

Results of Question 2: Why do people who directly benefit from an election (parents and teachers), especially the school election, choose not to vote?

Description	Quantity
People are too busy to fit this into their lives.	11
Nonvoters' votes do not count.	7
Political parties decide everything.	3
Nonvoters do not see how they directly benefit from the election.	3
Nonvoters are apathetic and lazy--voting is an effort.	2
Nonvoters don't care.	2
People don't see the connection—school will still open whether or not they vote.	2
People do not have enough information to make an educated decision.	1
Nonvoters are not raised with the importance of voting.	1
The importance of voting is not taught in schools.	1
We live in a country where things are not tough for us--we have not had to work for freedom.	1
People are focused on their own lives.	1
Nonvoters don't know why they don't vote.	1
Not voting is their way of saying no.	1
Baby boomers have raised their families, and now it is the responsibility of others.	1
Nonvoters have a problem with credibility.	1
Everyone believes the budget is padded and can afford to be cut.	1
People do not know about the school election.	1
The school district will find a way to make things continue as they are.	1
Tenure has given staff the security to believe that they won't lose their jobs.	1

Table 5

Results of Question 3: What could the district do to get the parents and staff involved in voting?

Description	Quantity
Show visible and more painful cuts.	5
Find a way to make it easier, more convenient to vote, such as: the internet, supermarket, or where they work.	5
Find a way to reward them for voting.	4
Some nonvoters indicated they really don't know.	3
Make them see how they benefit from the school election.	3
Make people feel they are part of the solution--how their vote will help change things for the better.	2
Some nonvoters indicated not voting is a way of life in this country because the nonvoters think they are wasting their time.	2
Start early. Put messages on the answering machine, and have secretaries give a voting message when answering the phone.	1
Get people involved in getting the funding for education changed-- eliminate the burden to the taxpayer.	1
Find a way to bring back community pride--bring back the sense of belonging to a community.	1
Post reminders and reasons to vote in individual developments.	1
Send a quarterly newsletter to staff and parents.	1
Reach out to community groups, i.e., Knights of Columbus, Women's Association, etc.	1
Hold events for the children on or shortly before the election and remind parents to vote.	1
Have the principals (not central administrators) reach out to the parents. They are who the parents are familiar with.	1
Pay employees a bonus if the budget passes, and cut it if it doesn't.	1
Threaten to shut down the schools.	1
Inform people on the entire process of school elections.	1
Involve them in the entire process from the beginning.	1

The intern also met with Parent/Teacher Organization (PTO) Presidents' Council, which includes the 10 presidents from each school's Parent/Teacher Organization. The president of each school's organization meets monthly to discuss issues vital to the district and to share fundraising activities. Also present at this meeting was the school's solicitor and the Assistant Superintendent. The meeting opened with a question and answer session with the solicitor as to what these groups could legally do to support the budget. Following the solicitor, the intern was introduced. The intern thanked the group for their time and proceeded to present the statistics that she had from the other interviews and then posed the questions. This discussion lasted for an hour and fifteen minutes. The general consensus of the group was as follows:

1. Apathy in this township doesn't just exist in the voting booth. The group has found that volunteering in the PTO drops off immensely as the children progress up the grade levels. Some individuals believe they are fulfilling their responsibility if they buy a fundraising item. There is a serious decline in participation at PTO meetings and events at the secondary level. There is difficulty obtaining parents to be room mothers/fathers when you get to middle school.
2. Many individuals in this town are what the group termed "house poor." Both spouses are working just to afford the mortgage payment; and they are going into debt just to buy basic necessities. In some cases, one of the spouses is working two jobs. For these individuals, the rise in real estate taxes has become a real burden. Although they will admit they moved here because of the excellent reputation of the school system, they do not want to hear how the state's school funding formula has changed. They just cannot afford the rising taxes.

3. Many people are skeptical because of the process. Even though the law says that the budget goes to town council for reduction if the budget fails, homeowners still see an increase in their taxes, and generally do not feel the impact of budget reductions. This has left many with the feeling that the budget is padded for this reason, which may cause taxpayers to vote no.
4. People do not like to be bombarded with all the literature on the budget. Residents do not like people telling them how to vote. It is believed that those individuals vote no. The group believed that if the intern attended one of the PTO meetings to obtain answers for the thesis that it would have a negative impact on the budget vote. They felt that this type of discussion would make the nonvoters feel guilty and that they would go and vote no to be spiteful.

The PTO presidents' group believed that the district needed to start early in the year, making the parents aware of the budget. They suggested having voter registration drives at back-to-school night. The district needed to be positive in its reinforcement by touting the accomplishments of the district and stressing the low-cost-per-pupil statistics as compared to similar districts in the region.

A discussion ensued on whether or not voting on the internet should be made an option. The group was divided on this issue. Some believed that with many people conducting a lot of their personal business on the internet (paying bills, shopping, etc.) that they would be more inclined to vote. The other segment believed that there was too much room for fraud if the internet was used and did not recommend this option, but suggested that the district should hold art night or something like it, the night of the election at the high school to give the parents another reason to be at the polling location.

The intern was extremely disheartened at the conclusion of the interview process, as the participants painted a picture of the American society as one that is totally self-involved and skeptical of the governmental process. Concurrently, at the conclusion of the interview process, the school district released results from an independent contractor noting that mold was found to be present in the HVAC systems of two identical middle schools. This was approximately one month before the annual school election for the budget and members of the Board of Education.

The Superintendent called for a special meeting of the Board of Education to discuss the findings and answer the questions and concerns of the parents and staff. Letters were sent to these groups informing them of the problem and inviting them to attend this special meeting. The Superintendent had assembled a team of professional experts comprised of engineers, microbiologists, hygienists, mold remediation contractors and laboratory doctors, who were also present at this meeting. After the professionals gave an explanation of the problem, possible effects on occupants, and the direction they planned to take for remediation of the mold, the floor was opened to the public for questions and comments. Approximately one-tenth of the individuals who spoke showed genuine concern over the mold findings and were looking to obtain information related to the issue at hand. It was apparent from the remaining comments and questions that a political campaign was being implemented to discredit members of the Board and administration, in light of the ensuing election. The panel, comprised of professionals, Board members, and administration, responded to comments and questions for five and one half hours. The intern left the meeting disappointed in the public's behavior, yet impressed over the patience and professional demeanor conveyed by the entire panel.

The conclusion of the interviews coincided with the meeting regarding the environmental problem at the middle schools. The intern's belief in her fellow man was shaken. She was frightened to think that our society had changed to a self absorbed distrusting society. Fortunately, she was able to put these events into perspective and realized she was projecting a select group of individuals onto the population as a whole.

The results of the 32 employees interviewed (Tables 4, 5, and 6) and the interview with the PTO president's council are indicative of why people choose not to vote. However, their opinions are not to be considered the all inclusive explanation of this problem facing our society. It can be summarized based upon this research that there are primarily three reasons that people do not go to the polls, which are:

1. People's lives are so full of work and family responsibilities that they either forget to vote or just cannot fit it into a normal day, or
2. They do not understand how their individual vote has any value. Even some of the stakeholders in the annual school election do not see how they benefit from the annual budget election, or
3. They just do not care about anything that doesn't have a direct impact on them or their family members.

How to Get the Apathetic Voter Involved in the Process

The interviewees believed that the voting process needed to be more convenient to fit into people's lifestyles; they recommended that voting take place while they did their banking or food shopping. Some even felt that people should be allowed to cast their vote over the internet. Others believed that if an immediate reward could be found for people to go to the polls, the participation rate would increase.

Budget Strategy Implemented by the School District

Based upon the findings of the research, in the fall of 2003, the Board and administration made the decision to maintain a low-key budget process. Low-key in this sense was to concentrate on the parents of children in Grades 1 through 8 and not reach out to the entire municipality. Heitzeg's theory of sell the sizzle, not the steak, was implemented. The District chose to implement the "Amway Plan" with members of the individual school budget committees that were comprised of parents and staff who resided in the community. Each member of the committee was to convince ten individuals to vote yes on the budget, and those ten were to convince another ten and so on down the line. The District had always used a phone chain on Election Day but called all registered voters in the community. However, this year the parent-teacher-organizations concentrated on the parents in their buildings, and the unions concentrated on their membership. At this time, the high school received a grant to implement a community involvement campaign. The teacher and student council involved in this project, entitled Project 540, choose the mission to get the public involved in the annual budget. They created a group entitled the "Friends of Washington Township" (Friends). This group organized a registration drive among the seniors at the high school; and at the conclusion of the drive, every student who was 18 years old by the statutory cut-off date was registered to vote. The Friends produced professional literature displaying the outstanding quality of Washington Township Public Schools and developed flyers showing what the school district had lost as a result of the \$1.5 million budget cut the year before. These students attended activities at all the schools in the month preceding the election. They politely approached individuals who were attending these functions,

introduced themselves and stated their purpose for attending and asked for the parents to support them through the budget on Election Day.

At the conclusion of the budget public hearing, the Board of Education approved the budget submitted by the Superintendent. This budget represented a 2.58 percent increase over the prior year and resulted in a tax increase on the average home of \$69. In the weeks spanning the public hearing on March 26, 2004, and Election Day April 20, 2004, the Superintendent met informally with small groups of parents to review and explain the budget and to discuss the mold issue that involved two of the middle schools. On the Friday preceding Election Day, a one-page flyer was sent home with the children highlighting points of the budget and accomplishments of the district; and on Monday, the day before the election, a one-page flyer was sent home stressing the lowest budget increase in ten years and the increase to the taxpayers along with a detailed list of budget cuts the prior year. On Election Day, round labels stating "Vote Today" were given to all the children in grades kindergarten through eighth to wear home as a reminder to the parents.

Results of the April 20, 2004, Election

The election results were as follows:

YES 2,728

NO 2,135

The budget passed by 593 votes which exceeded the margin of the 1995 and 2000 approved budgets. This was significant as the three preceding budget votes resulted in defeated budgets.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications and Further Study

Introduction

The intern attempted to ascertain why the stakeholders in the educational process do not participate in the annual school election and to identify and implement techniques that would motivate these stakeholders to go to the polls.

Conclusion and Implications

The intern was disappointed in the results of the study. Although the results from the study gave an indication as to why voter apathy exists, the response rate was not conclusive enough to project with any certainty the exact reasons why people choose not to vote. The interviews conducted suggested that there were three primary reasons for not going to the polls: (1) the hectic American lifestyle, (2) understanding the value of one's individual vote, and (3) lack of interest in what our government does. The intern and the administration believed that they could implement steps to bring the individuals in Categories 1 and 2 to the polls. The decision to send home simplistic messages on the three days preceding the election and on Election Day was meant to serve as a reminder to stakeholders of the election; this decision was made as a direct result of the interviews that took place as part of this study. The one message, which detailed the \$1.5 million cuts of the preceding year, was to illustrate the value of a vote.

Many factors may have contributed to the success of the April 20, 2004, budget election for the Washington Township School District. Was it the low-key approach adopted by the district? Was it the implementation of the "Amway Plan?" Did the calling

chain to just the stakeholders have a bearing? Was selling the sizzle, not the steak, effective? Did the concentration on the positives of the district (low budget increase, low per-pupil spending, and high-academic achievement on the simplistic literature disseminated to the stakeholders) contribute to the outcome? What part did the Friends of Washington Township play? Did the parents who witnessed blatant politicking at a public meeting held to inform them about a health and safety issue regarding their children anger them enough to come out to polls; or did the sincere efforts of the Board and administration shine through at this meeting which enlisted their support of the budget? How many positive votes were obtained by holding the registration drive at the high school? How many parents would have forgotten to vote if the "Vote Today" labels were not worn home by the students? Did any of the employees who participated in the election interview process feel guilty for not voting the prior year and go to the polls?

Regrettably, the intern and the administration will never know. The intern realized a design flaw in the study. There should have been an exit poll on Election Day to determine why people choose to vote. In hindsight, the intern believed that it was her own preconceived negative ideas that did not permit her to plan for a positive result to the budget election. In the absence of a post election survey, it will not be known what inspired people to come to the polls.

Twice during this process, the intern showed lack of faith in people. The first time, in the planning stage, the intern, having been through ten elections, had developed a predisposed opinion that it was next to impossible to achieve a positive result in an election. The intern believed that this predisposition was the result of the 1997 election where Question 1 on the ballot was a two-cent tax decrease, and the voters voted it down.

The second occurrence of lack of faith was during the meeting to inform the parents of the environmental situation at the two middle schools. The intern learned that one should not lose sight of the purpose for being in their position. In giving up on the community, the intern actually gave up on the children that she is committed to serve. The intern learned that it is imperative that administrators never lose sight of the vision and purpose of their schools and positions.

Part of the intern's normal job function is to ensure that the polling place is in compliance with election laws. The polls were open for nine hours (12 noon to 9 p.m.) on Election Day. The intern was present most of those hours, during which time the following was noted: many of the voters were middle aged and many parents brought their children to the polls with them. She listened to positive feedback from voters on the maturity displayed by the students in the Friends of Washington Township group. The intern noted that 11 of the 32 interviewees went to the polls.

Total votes for the budget decreased by 382 from the previous election. This single statistic implies that although the overall turnout was lower than prior years, more positive voters came to the polls. The intern would like to believe that all the questions asked above (Tables 3, 4, and 5) had a bearing on the passing of the 2004-2005 budget. However, future study would be needed to ascertain approximately how many voters were affected by each administrative initiative or other factors stated.

Impact of the Study on the Intern's Leadership Growth

The intern learned three valuable lessons during this project. First, the need to plan for every possible outcome. Had this been done, she would have been able to identify what strategy brought the positive voters to the polls. Second and most important, not to let anyone or anything get in the way of her commitment to the children; lastly, the need for positive communication throughout the entire school year. Many strategies were employed, all dealt with positive communication about the budget and school district. It could not be stated with certainty which one was the most effective, but all contained the same underlying tone.

Further Study

An exit survey of the voters to determine if they were regular voters and what made them choose to go to the polls on Election Day needs to be conducted. As noted earlier, the high school qualified for a grant entitled "Project 540". The purpose of this grant was to involve the students in a civic activity. The students elected to get the community involved in the annual school election. Additionally, the students in this group, along with some staff members, formed a non-profit group called "The Friends of Washington Township". Further study needs to be conducted to ascertain how beneficial the actions of these groups were on the outcome of the election. If the administration and Board are able to successfully implement a year-round positive communication plan, then a study of the impact of the plan will need to be conducted.

Several suggestions were made during the interview phase that implied that voting should be made easier for people. Some suggested that people be allowed to vote where they conduct other business such as the bank or the grocery store. Others suggested that

people be allowed to vote over the internet. The intern believes that the voting process needs to be studied in the states that have authorized internet voting to ascertain if participation rates have increased. Studies need to be conducted to ensure that this is a safe, secure environment to conduct such business. The research, noted in Chapter 2, indicated that positive communication is the key to a successful election. The intern will recommend that the school administration expand on the districts communication plan so that the positive image that was conveyed during the budget season is conveyed all year long.

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APPENDIX A

ELEVEN-YEAR HISTORY OF SCHOOL ELECTIONS

ELEVEN-YEAR HISTORY OF SCHOOL ELECTIONS

<u>DATE OF ELECTION</u>	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>DIFFERENCE</u>
1994	1,195	1,889	3,084	(694)
1995	1,755	1,267	3,022	488
1196 1997	1,343	1,442	2,785	(99)
QUESTION 1	3,405	3,667	7,072	(262)
QUESTION 2	3,427	3,672	7,099	(245)
1998	1,162	2,386	3,548	(1,224)
1999	2,144	2,975	5,119	(831)
2000	2,770	2,643	5,413	127
2001	2,304	2,535	4,839	(231)
2002	2,184	3,050	5,234	(866)
2003	2,251	2,987	5,238	(736)
2004	2,728	2,135	4,863	593

Referendum 10/17/95

Question 1	4900	3151	8,051	1,749
Question 2	4467	3433	7,900	1,034

Source: Certified Election Results Reports

APPENDIX B

VOTER TURNOUT IN GENERAL ELECTIONS AND SCHOOL ELECTIONS

VOTER TURNOUT IN GENERAL ELECTIONS AND SCHOOL ELECTIONS

<u>Gloucester County</u>	<u>Total Registered</u>	<u>Total Turnout</u>	<u>Percent Turnout</u>	<u>Type of Election</u>
2002	150,195	75,332	50.16%	State Offices
2001	148,258	14,830	10.00%	Primary Presidential Election
2000	157,352	107,925	68.59%	

Source: <http://www.co.gloucester.nj.us/clerk/elect.htm>

Washington Township School District Election

4/15/2003	29,315	5,321	18.15%
4/16/2002	28,553	5,311	18.60%
4/17/2001	28,108	4,910	17.47%

Source: Certified Election Results Reports

APPENDIX C

NATIONAL VOTER TURNOUT IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS:

1960-2000

NATIONAL VOTER TURNOUT IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS:
1960-2000

<u>Year</u>	<u>Voting-age Population</u>	<u>Voter Registration</u>	<u>Voter Turnout</u>	<u>Turnout of Voting-age Population (Percent)</u>
2000 *	205,815,000	156,421,311	105,586,274	51.3%
1998	200,929,000	141,850,558	73,117,022	36.4%
1996 *	196,511,000	146,211,960	96,456,345	49.1%
1994	193,650,000	130,292,822	75,105,860	38.8%
1992 *	189,529,000	133,821,178	104,405,155	55.1%
1990	185,812,000	121,105,630	67,859,189	36.5%
1988 *	182,778,000	126,379,628	91,594,693	50.1%
1986	178,566,000	118,399,984	64,991,128	36.4%
1984 *	174,466,000	124,150,614	92,652,680	53.1%
1982	169,938,000	110,671,225	67,615,576	39.8%
1980 *	164,597,000	113,043,734	86,515,221	52.6%
1978	158,373,000	103,291,265	58,917,938	37.2%
1976 *	152,309,190	105,037,986	81,555,789	53.5%
1974	146,336,000	96,199,020	1 55,943,834	38.2%
1972 *	140,776,000	97,328,541	77,718,554	55.2%
1970	124,498,000	82,496,747	2 58,014,338	46.6%
1968 *	120,328,186	81,658,180	73,211,875	60.8%
1966	116,132,000	76,288,283	3 56,188,046	48.4%
1964 *	114,090,000	73,715,818	70,644,592	61.9%
1962	112,423,000	65,393,751	4 53,141,227	47.3%
1960 *	109,159,000	64,833,096	5 68,838,204	63.1%

* Presidential election year

1 - Registration from Iowa not included.

2 - Registration from Iowa and Mo. not included.

3 - Registration from Iowa, Kans., Miss., Mo., Neb and Wyo. not included

D.C. did not have independent status.

4 - Registration from Ala., Alaska, D.C., Iowa, Kans., Ku., Miss., Mo., Nebr., N.M., N.D., Okla.,

S.D., Wis., and Wyo. not included.

5- Registration from Ala., Alaska, D.C., Iowa, Kans., Ky., Miss., Mo., Nebr., N.M., N.C., N.D., Okla., S.D., and Wyo. not included.

APPENDIX D
STRATAGIES IMPLEMENTED DURING PRIOR ELECTIONS TO BRING THE
VOTERS TO THE POLLS

STRATAGIES IMPLEMENTED DURING PRIOR ELECTIONS TO BRING THE
VOTERS TO THE POLLS

1. Meetings with the administration and parent groups such as the Parent/teacher's Organization, Athletic Booster Clubs, Women's Association, detailing the facts about the proposed budget.
2. Meetings with staff detailing the facts about the proposed budget.
3. Meetings with groups, traditionally opposed to the budget (senior citizens) detailing the facts about the proposed budget.
4. Mailing numerous newsletters to all residents of the community urging support of the proposed budget.
5. Not allowing community groups to use our facilities on election day so that voters won't have an excuse not to go to the polls.
6. Establishing budget committees at each school comprised of parents and staff.

APPENDIX E
SAMPLE LETTER TO EMPLOYEES

22 Bacon Street
Clayton, NJ 08312
March 6, 2004

Dear _____:

I am a graduate student at Rowan University working on my master thesis. My thesis asks the question, "What creates voter apathy, and what can be done to overcome it?" My study concentrates on the annual school election and is limited to the Washington Township School District in Gloucester County.

The superintendent has granted permission for me to interview employees of the school district to gain their perspective on the budget and election process and inquire what can be done to promote better voter turnout. He has also granted permission for me to use the school mail to help contain my costs.

Your name was selected from a staff listing. I would greatly appreciate it if you would be able to talk to me regarding this topic. I am currently employed as the school business administrator of the district and can be reached at Extension 6502 or by e-mail at pmeehan@wtps.org. Please contact me if you are able to spare some time for a brief interview and provide input for my paper.

I really appreciate your taking the time to consider this matter and hope to hear from you soon.

Very truly yours,

Margaret F. Meehan

APPENDIX F

SAMPLE LETTER TO PTO PRESIDENTS' COUNCIL

22 Bacon Street
Clayton, NJ 08312
March 5, 2003

Ms. _____
WTPC Co-President

122 Newport Road
Sicklerville, NJ 08081

Dear Ms. _____:

I am a graduate student at Rowan University working on my master thesis. My thesis asks the question, "What creates voter apathy, and what can be done to overcome it?" My study concentrates on the annual school election and is limited to the Washington Township School District in Gloucester County.

As part of my research project, I would like to interview employees and parents of the school district to gain their perspective on the budget and election process and what can be done to promote better voter turnout. I am writing you as the president of your organization to see if it would be feasible to have a dialogue with your members before or after your next meeting.

I would greatly appreciate it if you would be able assist me on this project. I am currently employed as the school business administrator of the Washington Township School District and can be reached at 589-6644, Ext. 6502, or by e-mail at pmeehan@wtps.org. Please contact me if you are able to spare some time for a brief interview and provide input for my thesis.

I really appreciate your taking the time to consider this matter and hope to hear from you soon.

Very truly yours,

Margaret F. Meehan

Biographical Data

Name	Margaret F. Meehan
High School	Gloucester Catholic High School Gloucester, NJ
Undergraduate	Bachelor of Arts Accounting Rutgers University Camden, NJ
Certifications	Certified Public Accountant Certified School Business Administrator Certified Purchasing Agent
Graduate	Master of Arts School Administration Rowan University Glassboro, NJ
Present Occupation	School Business Administrator/ Board Secretary Washington Township School District Sewell, NJ