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## Factors Influencing Stakeholder Support of a Bond Referendum in a Rural Kansas School District

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Factors Influencing Stakeholder Support of a  
Bond Referendum in a Rural Kansas School District

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine factors that influence stakeholder support of bond elections targeted for capital improvements in a rural school district in Kansas. The study uses existing research to identify factors that influence school bond referendum success. To better understand the factors identified in the research literature that influence stakeholder support in the focus district, data were gathered from stakeholders within the school district of focus through a perceptual survey and focus group interviews.

The availability of research on school bond referendum success and failure is plentiful. However, specific research on factors that influence rural school district stakeholder support for increased taxes to fund capital improvements (new or renovated facilities) is limited, especially rural school districts in Kansas. There is no “one-size-fits-all” strategy in gaining voter support for bond elections. This dissertation seeks to study factors that influence the support of increased taxes to cover capital improvements in one rural school district in Kansas. Results from this study illustrate the importance of consistent and transparent communication over a period of nine to twelve months before asking stakeholders to vote. This allows time for stakeholders to ask questions and understand the importance of a successful bond election. Unanimous support by board of education members was also found to be a critical factor. Community stakeholders should organize and lead the campaign to convince voters to support the bond referendum. Strategies of engagement are included in this study. The results of this research could guide or provide invaluable guidance to other rural school districts in Kansas when investigating voter perceptions towards supporting bond referendums.

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my parents, J. Gary and Ruth Woodward, who always encouraged me to work hard and follow my dreams. I wish you were still here to celebrate with me but you continue to be deeply rooted in my heart.

To my son Zachary, son Matthew and daughter-in-law Laura, I am far more proud of you than any accomplishment I have ever achieved. You bring joy, happiness, laughter and comfort to me each and every day. I always joke that you all are like food because it is hard to go a day without hearing from you. Always be humble and kind. Continue to do what is right, not what is easy and you will achieve much in life.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Introduction

A significant challenge facing today's rural school leaders in the United States is the problem of aging school buildings, and for many rural districts declining or stagnant school enrollments (Holt, 2017). While some rural districts have successfully passed school bond referendums, others have struggled. For school districts who struggle to gain stakeholder support during referendum elections, it becomes difficult to replace or upgrade aging school facilities. As these facilities begin to crumble, the rural school districts who struggle to pass bond referendums are caught scrambling to ensure that students have an environment that is conducive to learning.

According to the Hechinger Report (April 2019):

In 2014, a cash-strapped school district in rural northeast Kansas turned to its residents with a plea: Pay a little more in taxes annually so we can renovate classrooms, update the wiring and give students better spaces to learn.

Voters rejected the measure by a margin of 54 to 46 percent. While disappointing, the results were hardly surprising to the district's leaders. Unified School District 377 has tried – and failed – to pass measures for capital construction five times in 18 years. The last successful school bond campaign was in 1974. (para. 1)

A study conducted by The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis at The Pennsylvania State University concluded:

A large body of research over the past century has consistently found that school facilities impact teaching and learning in profound ways. Yet state and local policymakers often overlook the impact facilities can play in improving outcomes for both teachers and students. While improving facilities come at a financial cost, the benefits of such investments often surpass the initial fiscal costs. Policymakers, thus, should focus greater attention on the impacts of facilities and adopt a long-term cost-benefit perspective on efforts to improve school facilities. (para. 15)

Rural school districts in Kansas continue to face challenges associated with aging infrastructure such as heating/boiler systems, leaking roofs, damp and moldy basements, buildings with asbestos, and electrical/plumbing. Compounding this concern includes the

difficulty of retrofitting old facilities with Ethernet wiring for internet access and science labs that are obsolete. The failure to gain stakeholder support for new or improved facilities hinders the process of offering rural children an education equal to children in larger, wealthier school districts.

Holt (2017) shared:

Nearly two-thirds of the schools need roughly \$11 billion (an average of \$2 million per school) to comply with federal mandates over the next three years. “ From those \$11 billion, schools need approximately \$5 billion (54 percent) to correct or remove hazardous substances, such as asbestos, lead in water or paint, materials contained in UST, and radon or meet other requirements while over \$6 billion (55 percent) is needed to make programs physically accessible to all students (p. 9).

Unfortunately, when compared to wealthier school districts, rural school districts across Kansas struggle to pass school bond referendums. In May of 2017, for example, the small rural community of Lincoln, KS (district population approximately 300 students) put forth a bond issue, which failed by a 2-1 margin. The intent of this bond issue was simply to upgrade current facilities, not the construction of a new facility (Herbert, 2017). According to data provided by the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE), since 2013, 56 Kansas school districts of 4A classification or smaller attempted to pass a bond referendum at least once. Of those 56 districts, 25 districts failed on their first attempt. Only three passed on the second attempt and all others failed. Hanover Research (2012) found, “the percentage of passing bond measures in American school districts declined from 75 percent in 1960 to 35 percent in 1989” (p. 2). The purpose of this study is to examine factors that influence stakeholder support of bond referendums in the Delaware Valley School District (DVSD) (pseudonym).

### **Problem Statement**

In August 2019, stakeholders of the DVSD voted down a proposed one mill levy increase in support of a recreation commission. “More than 700 people turned out to vote, with over 62%

of those voters rejecting the recreation commission” (Hoffman KSNT, 2019). If approved, the Delaware Valley School District Board of Education would have created a group of district stakeholders to organize and run this recreation commission, which would have created recreational opportunities for not only school-aged children but all citizens within the school district. “The group would have focused on activities like athletic leagues, after-school programs, and events for senior citizens” (Brunner WIBW). Hoffman KSNT (2019) stated:

The proposed commission would have been a five-person board with a yearly budget of around \$70,000. This would come from raising a mill levy in the district. For a home worth \$150,000 this would mean \$17.25 in additional taxes.

Regardless of the benefit to the children and citizens of the DVSD, stakeholders overwhelming voted down the proposal by almost two-thirds of the total vote, even though it would have only cost a \$150,000 homeowner just under \$1.50 a month in new taxes.

At the August 2019 DVSD Board of Education meeting, the board president shared that two of the past three bond referendums have failed. The district’s high school is nearly 50 years old. The intermediate elementary building is over 60 years old and the early childhood building is nearly 75 years old. DVSD district officials will eventually need to ask district stakeholders to support a bond referendum to address aging facilities and future enrollment growth associated with plans for residential building developments occurring in the southeast corner of the school district. With a history of district stakeholders rejecting of tax increases for new facilities, school district officials struggle to understand the reason behind this lack of support.

This problem of stakeholder reticence is significant as state funding remains stagnant and facilities or infrastructures continue to deteriorate. Additionally, maintenance costs continue to rise causing rural school districts in Kansas to struggle with offering equitable educational opportunities to students. The purpose of this study is to examine factors that influence

stakeholder support of bond referendums in a rural Kansas school district (DVSD). The DVSD is classified as a rural school district based on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which classifies school districts into four categories City (large, midsize, small), Suburb (large, midsize, small), Town (Fringe, Distant, Remote) and Rural (Fringe, Distant and remote). NCES classifies the DVSD as a “Rural Distant” school district. The definition of Rural Distant is “Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles, but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster. An Urbanized Area is a statistical geographic entity delineated by the Census Bureau, consisting of densely settled census tracts and blocks and adjacent densely settled territory that together contain at least 50,000 people” (NCES, 2020).

### ***Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issues***

Instructional issues related to this problem include insufficient space for anticipated enrollment increases. Currently, the Delaware Valley Early Childhood facility is at capacity in terms of classroom space. The intermediate elementary building is utilizing the stage as a SPED classroom and recently moved the vocal music teacher to the library to utilize a shared space with the library media specialist. The cause of the current increase in facility space demands was the addition of a district daycare (for ages 18 months to five-year-olds) and an expansion of the pre-kindergarten program to include 3-year-olds at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year. The addition of the district daycare and expanded pre-kindergarten program has placed a demand for additional space at the elementary level. An expected influx of enrollment, resulting from pending building permits for residential housing in the southeast corner of the DVSD will compound the current issues with insufficient classroom space. Housing developers are currently waiting on Farmdale (pseudonym) city officials to annex the rural property, located in the



southeast corner of the DVSD. Once the annex is approved, the builders will be able to obtain building permits to access the city of Farmdale utility infrastructures.

Systemic issues related to this problem include concerns stakeholders have raised about insufficient communication. The DVSD conducts an annual parent perception survey. The 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 survey indicated a need for better communication from school district officials. Additionally, this concern was shared at the spring 2019 District Site Council (DSC) meeting. DSC is a committee of district stakeholders who provide feedback and advice on district initiatives and practices. This communication concern was felt even greater by the failure of the recreation commission vote. While promoting the bond referendum vote, school district officials consistently battled false information promoted by stakeholders who opposed the mill levy increase associated with the bond referendum. District officials must develop a better understanding of why stakeholders opposed this small tax increase. According to Godown (2010):

The issue of trust and credibility in a school bond referendum cannot be ignored. This trust takes years to foster, build, and cultivate. The actions of the individuals involved in orchestrating the referendum must be transparent, straightforward, honest and open at all times. (p. 81)

As shared at the August 2019 Delaware Valley Board of Education meeting, the failure of stakeholders to support the proposed recreation commission was partially due to mistrust or misunderstanding of the rationale behind the proposed commission. A significant responsibility of the school administration in the rural setting is to build and cultivate the relationship between the school and community through communication (Winand & Edlefsen, 2008). The problem of passing school bond referendums is exacerbated by the fact that few institutions of higher education prepare school administrators for the task (Holt, 2017). In many instances, school bond

issues have failed because administrators were not prepared to plan an effective strategy for passing them (Holt, 2017).

School district officials must find more successful strategies to connect and partner with all stakeholders in the rural community to gain support in passing bond referendums that provide adequate and educationally conducive facilities in the rural setting. This study intends to determine more effective ways to address this systemic issue within the context of this rural Kansas school district.

### *Is Directly Observable*

Kraus (2009) stated in anticipation of a bond referendum, “it behooves school boards and district administration to assess what is likely to be supported by stakeholders before they identify the specifics of a bond issue” (p. 17). As such, an area of research that should be explored is the opposition toward school bond referenda (Benzaquen, 2016). The recent attempt and failure of the DVSD to pass a one-mill tax increase in support of a recreation commission allowed district officials to learn firsthand the importance of Kraus’ (2009) recommendation. Numerous stakeholders within the DVSD expressed hesitation in supporting the mill levy increase due to the school district’s inability to counter the false information promoted by the opposition. There appears to be a difference in vision between the school district and its tax-paying citizens. To plan a successful school bond referendum, school officials should be aware of those factors that influence election outcomes (Holt, 2017). Considering feedback gathered from the perception surveys and DSC meetings, communication, and relationship building appear to be an issue. Further research on obstacles that impact the ability of the Delaware Valley school district to communicate effectively and build trusting relationships with district stakeholders must be examined.

### ***Is Actionable***

Holt (2017) found that an ongoing community relations program that functions as a regular part of school district services is essential (p. 19). As a district administrator and facilitator of the District Site Council (DSC), the researcher is in a position to acquire community perceptions of the latest failed vote to increase the mill levy tax. Additionally, information regarding the community perception of future facility needs or demands can also be gathered through the annual accreditation perceptual survey that addresses district needs. Piele and Hall (1973) and Moore (2018) emphasized the importance of understanding the desires of voters because their research shows that school districts have minimal impact on the actual success of bond referendums. Suffice to say, the DSC, with parent and community business leader membership, could serve as the main catalyst for motivating voters to support future bond referendums.

### ***Connects to a Broader Strategy of Improvement***

There are two long term goals identified by the DVSD Board of Education that will connect to this problem of practice. One is the continued focus on communication and relationships built on trust with all community stakeholders. The second goal area includes improving the physical learning environment. Specifically, the district's goal is to establish a long-term sustainable facility plan which addresses needed growth and maximizes district facilities. Working with the DSC, and continuing to collect data from the annual parent and teacher perceptual surveys, will help drive the path in meeting these board of education goals. Moore (2018) shared: “Identifying meaningful data may assist school districts in providing the children of Texas an advantage when it comes to having first-class facilities (p. 6).” A better understanding of variables that impact the failure of stakeholders to support new taxes within the

DVSD should provide meaningful data to help create an action plan for a future district bond referendum. Clemmons et al. (2010) noted, “Without an effective means to listen and learn from the local community, district-community relationships can become unnecessarily adversarial, and community support for district needs may be likely to decline” (p. 16).

### ***Is High Leverage***

As Kansas rural communities located near larger cities like Topeka, Lawrence, Overland Park, Olathe and Kansas City continue to experience population growth, the need to expand or build new school district facilities is inevitable. Although it is difficult to predict how soon, the DVSD superintendent expects substantial enrollment growth once the land, owned by multiple housing developers, is annexed by the City of Farmdale. Once this land annexation occurs by Farmdale, housing developers will tap into the utility infrastructure needed for the proposed housing developments. Delaware Valley district facilities are currently adequate for 2019-2020 enrollment numbers of roughly 750 (K-12), but an increase in student enrollment resulting from a development of 1,000 to 1,500 homes, could create a facility crisis in terms of appropriate instructional space. If this anticipated growth occurs, the DVSD must respond with a successful bond referendum that addresses facility space needs.

Holt (2017) summarized:

Most troubling is the inequity of K-12 public school facilities from community to community. Some children learn in state-of-the-art school buildings, with the most modern labs, classrooms, and computer centers available. But too many students suffer in buildings that were out of date decades ago and are an embarrassment in the world’s richest country. (p. 60)

Identifying strategies that will assist with successfully promoting and passing a new facility bond issue campaign is undoubtedly high-leverage because it would make a significant difference in the future academic facilities within this school district. As DVSD officials

determine how to address aging facilities and the anticipated enrollment growth associated with housing developments, this study of the reasons for lack of support by district stakeholders to support bond referendums carries great value to the future of educating the children within this rural school district.

### ***Research Questions***

1. What rationale(s) for rural bond referendum impact passage?
2. What are the challenges of communicating the rationale for a bond referendum?
3. What are local community perceptions regarding the tax increases to support building or updating facilities?

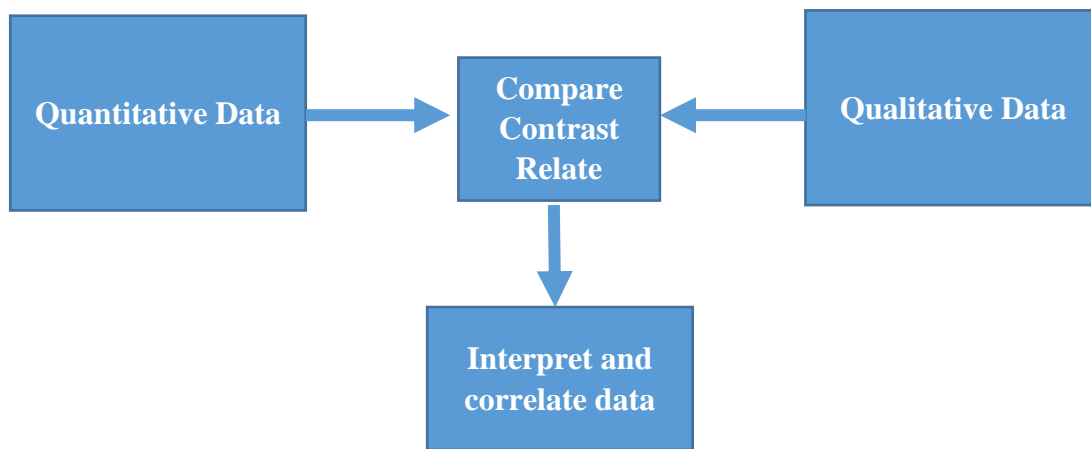
### **Overview of Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to examine factors that influence stakeholder support of tax increases associated with DVSD initiatives. The DVSD has failed to pass 2 of 3 previous bond referendums presented to district stakeholders and a one millage increase to fund a recreation commission. Ravitch and Carl (2016) shared, “The research design does not matter unless you, as the researcher, approach the data collection process with the understanding that people are experts of their own experiences” (p. 114). To understand why stakeholders consistently choose to oppose any new taxes related to school district improvements, there is a need to study perceptions that impact the lack of district stakeholder support for increased taxes. The information gained from this study will help the researcher resolve a problem of practice within the DVSD, which is the unwillingness of stakeholders to support bond referendums or millage increases associated with school district initiatives.

A case study with a mixed-methods approach of data collection including quantitative and qualitative will be utilized. The case study involves the investigation of a real-life event or

multiple events and can include multiple data sources such as documents, artifacts, surveys, and interviews (Yin, 2009). Kraus (2009) analyzed critical factors in the success and failure of school bond referendums in Kansas and made recommendations to further study the opinions of community members to determine what attributes result in feelings of mistrust of school administration and school boards. The goal of this study is to identify stakeholder perceptions of the effects on school district enrollment growth when associated with the anticipated housing developments, the effectiveness of district communication regarding the needs of the school district, and perceptions on why stakeholders would or would not support a bond referendum. District stakeholders will be offered the opportunity to participate in a Likert-scaled perceptual survey that relates to the research questions. Additionally, DSC members and community members, in general, will be offered the chance to participate in a focus group study. There will be five focus group interviews, all conducted through Zoom Video Communications<sup>®</sup>, which is mandatory due to COVID-19. There will be one meeting with the DSC and one focus group interview with each of the four school district towns of “Fenway, Comiskey, Shea, and Wrigley” (pseudonyms). Marshall and Rossman (2016) defined focus groups as, “7 to 10 people (although groups range from as small as 4 persons to as large as 12 people) who are unfamiliar with one another and have been selected because they share certain characteristics relevant to the study’s questions” (p. 153). The DSC is comprised of parents from every building level in the district and each community. This means that although they may know the other members of the group, they are certainly unfamiliar with how others on the committee feel regarding the research questions. Stakeholders selected to participate in the interviews will be representatives of different demographic groups including retirees, parents, non-parents but working in the workforce, small business owners and ranchers/agricultural farmers.

This research will utilize the convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) describe the convergent parallel design as a process whereas the researcher analyzes the survey data quantitatively and the focus group qualitatively, then merges the two sets of data to best determine how results converge or diverge. Comparisons and contrasts of past bond referendum campaign strategies and voting precinct results could shed light on potential trends in bond election outcomes. Studying past voting results of bond elections in combination with a Likert-scaled survey will provide quantitative data. Focus group interviews will provide qualitative data on the perception of school district voters towards current and future issues facing the DVSD, as well as reasons voters have refused to support tax increases.



**Figure 1**  
*Convergent Parallel Design Diagram*

### **Positionality**

As a district administrator, I have the opportunity to be involved at every level within the DVSD. Additionally, as a 25-year employee of this district, I have connected with many stakeholders over the years and now see children of former students enrolled in high school. The connection that I have is deep and personal, which means I am passionate about finding the solution to this problem of practice. By determining a solution, I expect this data to help my

district run a successful bond issue that addresses the anticipated increase in enrollment without experiencing overcrowded classrooms that are detrimental to educating our students. As I conduct research, my knowledge of the culture and past struggles of this school district, as well as rural school districts in Kansas should be an advantage, yet I must keep my bias in check. Creswell (2007) stated, “How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class and personal politics that we bring to research. All writing is ‘positioned’ and within a stance” (p. 178). Herr and Anderson (2015) maintained:

While the researcher’s positionality in relation to the setting is important, it is often no simple matter to define one’s position. Some researchers who are outsiders to the setting have little knowledge of it, while others may have extensive—and often firsthand—knowledge of the context. (p.39)

Holmes (n.d.) contends “A reflexive approach suggests that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in the research, aiming to understand their own influences on and in the process; rather than trying to eliminate their effect” (p. 5). As a 25-year employee of this school district, the potential for bias towards stakeholders and their feelings regarding the effectiveness of the district that I hold dear to my heart must be considered. As a researcher, I must recognize that my personal beliefs and assumptions may not agree with individuals I have known for years. The perceptions they hold must be considered because those perceptions are a reality in their mind, therefore it does affect the success of the future bond referendum. It would seem feasible that any recommendation for bond referendum strategies should address trending perceptions amongst vocal school district stakeholders who have the power to influence others.

### **Researcher’s Role**

My current position as a district office administrator at the DVSD offers me the opportunity to be involved in all discussions for future district plans, including community engagement through site council meetings and a point of contact for any school district



stakeholder who has a question about the school district in general. With a 32-year history of working in small rural school districts in Kansas, (25 in my current district), I have accumulated a wealth of colleagues who have fueled my interest in the successful passage on bond issues in rural Kansas communities. I have developed a personal interest in the resolution of this problem of practice.

The researchers relationship with the DVSD began in 1988 when I completed my student-teaching. The following school year I accepted a teaching job at Delaware Valley Middle School and was employed as a teacher/athletic coach for 11 years until 2000. In the fall of 2000, I accepted a teaching job in a nearby rural, but larger school district. I taught for seven years in this district before returning to my original/current employer in 2007 as an administrator. I have served as either a building or district administrator in my current district since 2007. From 2007 to 2010, I served as an assistant middle school principal which included responsibilities of district transportation and food service director. In 2010, I accepted the job as the building principal at the middle school and served in this capacity through 2015. In 2015, I accepted the position of Director of Curriculum and Instruction with responsibilities that include curriculum adoption, alignment and instruction, state and federal programs such as pre-k and Title 1 grants, and personnel recruiting including hiring, retaining, mentoring and evaluations of staff. I oversee the district's emergency operations/safe schools program, serve as the district test coordinator, and district accreditation coordinator.

Due to my current position, I am actively involved in decision-making associated with the planning of future facility needs for the focus school district of this study. Gathering information about past Delaware Valley bond referendums, and other similar rural Kansas school districts is a process that I would be involved with regardless of whether or not I was completing

this dissertation. By utilizing the skills and knowledge I have acquired from the EDLE program at the University of Arkansas, my task will be to research and determine why DVSD stakeholders have repeatedly rejected bond referendums or millage increases in support of improving the school district.

### **Study Assumptions**

Assumptions were made as a result of conversations with DVSD stakeholders and stakeholders from other rural Kansas school districts who have experienced success and failure in passing a bond referendum.

The first assumption is that the lack of community engagement and communication from all district staff during bond campaigns contributes to bond referendum failure. This engagement determines what stakeholders will accept and will not accept in terms of new or upgraded facilities. Failure to thoroughly engage the community in this planning process is detrimental to the success of the bond referendum. Godown (2010) determined:

The importance of trust and credibility also emerged as a dominant influential factor in this study. However, the issue of trust and creditability extended beyond that of the superintendent and board of education/trustees, but also to the trust of district staff, teachers and administrators. (p. 80)

The second assumption is the more attempts a district makes to pass a bond referendum, the less chance it has to pass. As reported by the DVSD board president, the district has failed to successfully pass three of four bond referendums in the past few decades. Bowers and Lee (2013) reported: "Thus the first attempt is the most important, and so a district should devote the needed resources to help ensure that the bond will pass on the first attempt" (p. 762). Therefore, it is critical to give community stakeholder voice so the DVSD can truly understand stakeholder perceptions in terms of supporting a bond referendum.

A third assumption is that facility infrastructure plans and proposed location impact the success of the bond referendum. Since there are four different towns (Fenway, Comiskey, Shea, and Wrigley) located within the DVSD, the assumption is that stakeholders from each township will desire some sort of benefit for their community including new or upgraded facility plans proposed by the bond referendum. McLean and Martin (1991) found, “A key component in the success of bond issues is the appearances of providing some benefits for everyone” (p. 41). If true, Delaware Valley district officials must understand voter perceptions regarding how a bond referendum will impact each township within the school district boundary lines.

A fourth assumption is community stakeholders who participate in the survey or focus groups will be honest and straight forward about their beliefs, ideas, and support. Their honesty is critical to understanding this problem of practice.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*Assessed Valuation* – is the assessed value of a home, business or property. That value determined the amount of taxes the owner pays each year.

*Assessed Valuation Per Pupil (AVPP)* – The assessed value of a school district divided by total enrollment of school district.

*Bond referendum* – Voters who live within a school district boundary have the opportunity to approve or disapprove a proposal to permit school district officials to issue bonds to pay for extensive upgrades to the facility, a new facility or perhaps purchase new infrastructure and equipment such as technology. Also known as bond election and bond issue.

*Consolidation* – Two smaller school district that combine to form a larger school district.

*District Site Council* – a committee of parents, community stakeholders, and school district officials that meet quarterly to discuss school district initiatives, concerns, plans and/or strategic goals. The majority of the committee members must be non-school employees.

*Feeder towns* – Multiple towns/small communities located within one school district.

*Focus district* – The school district where the researcher of this dissertation is employed. Also, the school district hopes to benefit from the gained knowledge and recommendations resulting from this research.

*KASB* – Kansas Association of School Boards supports Kansas school districts with legal issues and questions, collects and distributes data and provides professional development for school districts and local school board members.

*KESA* – Kansas Education Systems Accreditation is an accreditation process that aligns with the Kansas State Board of Education’s vision for Kansas. Public school districts in Kansas follow the accreditation process as outlined by the Kansas Department of Education. The process is a 5-year cycle with accreditation occurring at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> year.

*Mill Levy* – property tax that is based on the assessed value of a home, business or property. One mill equals one dollar for every \$1,000 of assessed value.

*Rural School District* – (fringe, distant or remote as defined by NCE.ed.gov). The DVSD would be classified as distant per location that is more than 5 miles, but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area or more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

*Social-Economic Factors* – Within the context of this dissertation, it includes income, education level, or employment rate within the school district boundary.

## **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation proposal consists of three chapters. Chapter One includes an introduction to the problem of practice, the five dimensions of the problem of practice, research questions, the methodology used, and positionality including the researcher's role and assumptions regarding the problem of practice. The chapter concluded with the definition of key terms.

Chapter Two will include a literature review of previous research conducted on rural bond referendums and community engagement. This literature review will assist with gathering information to better understand previously conducted research on variables associated with bond referendum passage and failure. It will also assist with identifying the path this researcher should take to answer established research questions. To provide a lens of the research process, a conceptual framework will also be included in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three will include specific inquiry methods to be used during the research process. Specific guidelines and rationale for the type of research to be conducted will be shared. The research setting will be identified, including demographics of the focus district. Data collection tools, methods of collecting the data and the method of analyzing the data will be shared. Chapter Four will include the collected data from this research. Chapter Five will include the findings and recommendation.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine factors influencing stakeholder support of a bond referendum in the Delaware Valley School District (DVSD). As recently as August 2019, voters in the DVSD rejected a proposed one-mill property tax increase to fund a recreation commission. This recreation commission would be comprised of five individuals appointed by the DVSD Board of Education. The commission would be responsible for hiring a recreation director who would then organize and run recreational activities for stakeholders throughout the school district (birth to senior citizen). School district buses could be utilized for non-school related field trips and school district facilities could have been more accessible for district stakeholders including a location for senior citizens to meet. About one month before the election, the opposition created much division amongst district stakeholders by spreading misinformation about the amount stakeholders' property taxes would increase if the initiative was successful. Additionally, rumors circulated that only residents of one town would benefit from this recreation commission, as well as the school district had already hired the recreation director. These rumors quickly spun out of control late in the campaign, resulting in an insurmountable disadvantage for supporters who frantically tried to deal with the resulting distrust of school district officials and supporters. "More than 700 people turned out to vote, with over 62% of those voters rejecting the recreation commission" (Hoffman KSNT, 2019). During a board of education meeting that occurred one week after this failed vote, the DVSD Board of Education (BoE) president shared two of the previous three bond referendums in this district had failed. The one referendum that did pass created some maintenance issues due to cost saving cutbacks on the facility that was built.

Of great concern to the DVSD is the recent construction of a multimillion-dollar NCAA Division 1 athletic complex located just inside the school district boundary line. An approximate 900 unit apartment complex (with its own golf course and community swimming pool) was built immediately north of this athletic complex, also within the DVSD school district boundary. This athletic complex is located approximately 10 miles from the nearest town within the DVSD school district. Housing developers have announced plans to build 1,000 to 1,500 homes near these apartments, on land that is also located within the DVSD. The developers, along with city officials from a neighboring school district, have participated in an ongoing conversation about the annexation of this rural property so developers can tap into utilities. Once approved, enrollment growth is imminent for the DVSD. This would exacerbate the current concern of an unsuccessful bond referendum.

The primary focus of this research study is to become more familiar with the factors impacting voter decisions to support bond referendums that fund the DVSD. To support the research questions identified in Chapter One, four related questions were developed to analyze existing research concerning public school bond referendum success and failure. Those questions include:

1. How does leadership influence the success or failure of bond referendums?
2. How do campaign strategies impact a rural bond referendum's success or failure?
3. What are the potential factors that impact voter support of tax increases, especially in rural school districts?
4. Are there any variables unique to rural school districts that influence bond referendum success?

Primary search engines utilized during this literature review include the University of Arkansas library search engine, EBSCOhost, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest. Key search words and/or phrases included bond referendum success and/or failure, bond issue success and/or failure, bond election success and/or failure, factors or variables that impact bond success, rural school bond referendums, leadership, public school administrator leadership, public school bond referendums, and trust between community and school. This literature review will provide direction in creating the methodology that will guide research and determine solutions to this problem of practice within the DVSD.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Administrative Leadership***

Superintendents, as the visible leaders of school districts, are the focal points for developing a grassroots support system to pass a bond issue, therefore, bond referendum success is contingent on strong “*leadership*” during the bond campaign process (Neill, 2003). Gaining taxpayer support can be a difficult process that requires leadership from school and community stakeholders. Florence (2014) argued that superintendents receive little to no training to help them navigate through this complicated process. Due to the lack of literature or materials to guide superintendents, compounded by their lack of experience in organizing bond campaigns, there is a high rate of failed school bond elections (Florence, 2014).

Waters (2004) argued that while overall literature supports a “low-key” profile by district officials, his research found just 56.6% of his survey participants (i.e., school board members, school district administrators, and advisory committee members) felt it was important. A slightly higher percentage (58.9%) felt non-school officials taking the lead was important. Ultimately, Waters (2004) recommended the “low-key” campaign be replaced by an all-inclusive campaign



to reach as many voters as possible. Waters' (2004) research was based on one school district in Texas causing him to recommend that school districts carefully consider the culture of their communities before determining leadership roles of school officials and community members. In other words, what applies to this Texas school district may not apply to Kansas school districts such as the DVSD.

In contrast, Kraus (2009) recognizes the importance that school district officials should remain "low-key" but also suggested that school referendums can still be successful without the "low-key" approach. Kraus (2009) stated, "Nothing spells defeat for a bond election more quickly than when the voters feel they are being misled or do not have an accurate picture of the district's needs" (p. 42). Kraus (2009) who examined small, medium and large school districts in Kansas indicated "in some districts, it was felt that the citizens should be in the forefront and in others having the administration "lead the charge" was viewed as essential to the bonds success" (pp. 70-71).

Neil (2003) felt that superintendents who have been thrust into the role of spokesperson must emphasize and relate the rationale of the bond proposal to the school district's educational goals. "They must clearly communicate the purpose of the bond issue and its role in the education of students" (Neil, 2003, p. 70). Research by Dunbar (1991) supported this view by stating "Leaders of the school district that have a successful record in passing bond issues keep the public informed on the issues and problems facing their district" (p. 98). "It is the job of the superintendent to be the face of the project. The superintendent should present the school bond referendum to as many constituents as possible (Godown, 2010, p. 92).

"School principals and superintendents are the natural stewards of public education, and it is in their interest to foster strong community support for public education" (Goldring &

Greenfield, 2005). Determining what stakeholders will support is critical to bond referendum success and making a consistent effort to keep the community informed about the needs of the school district is vital. “Educating the public regarding the school’s needs should occur on an ongoing basis, not just in response to the district being on the ballot” (Johnson, 2008, p. 42).

Leaders need to adopt strategies and styles that are in harmony with the central tenets of the “heterarchical” school organizations they seek to create; they must learn to lead not from the apex of the organizational pyramid but from a web of interpersonal relationships – with people rather than through them. (Murphy, 2015, p. 1080)

Theobald and Meier (2002) argued that districts would benefit from having teachers advocate for the bond referendum because voters were more likely to trust and support teachers over administrators and further stated that “Teachers also appear to play a vital role in the passage of bonds. Their influence on election outcomes goes beyond their own vote, such that they can also be effective advocates for bond measures” (Theobald and Meier, 2002, p. 14).

The deliverer of the message also carries significant importance in the success of a bond referendum. Holt (2017) shared “the greatest success were those in which administration played a ‘low-key’ role, while members of the support group assumed the primary responsibilities for educating the public (p. 20). Support groups may vary from district to district but primarily involves citizens from the community, not school district officials. When school district officials, such as the superintendent become the primary spokesperson in favor of a bond referendum, the perception among voters is the superintendent is the sole creator of the bond proposal and it became detrimental to the success of gaining voter support (Mobley, 2007).

### **Local Board of Education Leadership**

Unanimous support by the local board of education for the bond proposal is critical in its successful passage (Dunbar, 1991; Weathersby, 2002; Holt, 2002; Mobley, 2007; Kraus, 2009; and Adams, 2017). According to Holt (2017), when the board of education cannot reach a

consensus on the need for a bond referendum, a vote of approval should not occur. Without unanimous support by all board of education members, it appears to hinder the chances for a successful bond referendum. Dunbar (1991) advised that failure to gain unanimous board member support communicated a message to district stakeholders the bond proposal was not necessary. Understanding the impact of full board member support, Weathersby (2002) recommended “special attention” be given to gaining unanimous approval by all board of education members.

Many researchers believe that finding well-respected community members to lead the campaign is extremely important (Weathersby, 2002; Holt, 2002; Waters, 2004; Godown, 2010; Florence, 2014; and Adam, 2017). Holt (2017) further argued that the success of a bond referendum was limited if an influential community leader could not be found.

Benzaquen (2016) emphasized that the avoidance of community stakeholders in the first two bond elections in Erie, Wisconsin led to trust issues. The third and subsequent bond election was successful because community leaders led the charge by sharing the rationale or need for the bond proposal. The Erie school district hired a consultant in the first two failed bond elections. The consultant was viewed as an outsider who did not truly understand the needs and desires of school district stakeholders. After school officials utilized community leaders, rather than a consultant to lead the third bond campaign, it passed.

In the end, research implies that school district officials must investigate the cultural autonomy of their respective school districts when determining how or who should lead the school bond referendum process. This requires a thorough investigation into the perceptions of all school district stakeholders to determine who they will follow and trust during the school

bond campaign. What works or is preferred by one school district may not be the same in another school district.

### **Factors Identified That Improve Bond Referendum Success**

#### ***Communication***

Trust and communication are important factors in the referendum process. Both Holt (1993) and Florence (2014) stated that transparent and detailed communication is critical to bond referendum success. While choosing who to lead the bond referendum campaign is important, effective communication is also a critical aspect of passing the bond proposal.

Benzaquen (2016) conducted his research on one school district in Wisconsin which failed to pass a bond referendum on the first and second attempt but passed on the third. Benzaquen (2016) found the district task force ignored the opposition during the first attempt, causing a further divide between the supporters and opposition on the second attempt. By listening to concerns of the opposition and framing the third referendum as a saving rather than a cost, it passed. Benzaquen (2016) opined, “effective communication remained the main overarching reason why the third referendum passed when the first two failed” (p. 123). His finding was consistent with Godown (2010) and Russo (2010) who proposed that to successfully market a school bond referendum, the school district must keep constituents aware and informed of the project. Research suggests leadership must ensure transparent communication is ongoing. “Transparency isn’t something you just trot out when you want money” (LaFee, 2008, p. 4).

Communication is a two-way street which includes listening. Kraus (2009) recognized the importance of listening to voters by stating:

The willingness of the district to modify its vision of a bond proposal after assessing the voters’ perceptions was identified by many respondents as being an important factor in constructing a bond proposal that would secure the support of the majority of the voters (p. 70).

Kraus (2009) also shared, “Unsuccessful districts opined that there had not been enough genuine two-way communication in their districts and that there was a certain level of mistrust between district officials and the voters” (p. 109). Furthermore, Kraus (2009) stressed the importance of listening when determining the wishes of all community stakeholders. As such, school districts who found success in passing bond referendums were able to successfully develop a vision that was shared by all. School officials can be more involved in taking the lead in promotional activities contingent on consistent and transparent communication (Godown 2010). Poynton, Kirkland, and Makela (2016) stressed the importance of “active listening” to a variety of district stakeholders due to the positive impact this practice has on “navigating complex issues related to district operations, policy, and governance” (p. 289).

Graham et al. (1990) determined the voting population can be divided into thirds. One-third will support the school bond referendum, one-third will not support the school bond referendum and the middle third will be the segment of the population who will determine the outcome. Thusly, leadership and campaign advocates must listen to the perceptions of the middle third to ensure needs and desires are addressed. “In designing a successful campaign, you will need to know the issues that will sway the middle to vote yes” (Graham, Wise, & Bachman, 1990, p. 14).

### ***Trust***

Godown (2010) investigated factors that contributed to successful school bond referendums in 512 school districts in New Jersey. Based on his interviews with the superintendent in those school districts, Godown stated: “Clearly, the factor of “*trust*” and credibility weighs heavily in the successful passing of a school bond referendum” (p. 81). Godown (2010) went on to say trust and credibility cannot be ignored and must be a focus

between the school district and constituents. Trust takes years to “foster, build, and cultivate” and an ongoing public relations program must be established by school district administration (p. 81). Tschannen-Moran (2014) stated, “Improving the quality of communication between home and school was noted as the best way to build trust between families and a school” (p. 208).

One method of listening is to implement a needs assessment. School districts should conduct a needs assessment to better understand the community’s needs as well as encourage community involvement (Dunbar, 1991; Holt, 1993; Weathersby; 1992, and Benzaquen, 2016). Florence (2014) recommended that in advance of any bond proposal school districts conduct its own survey to better understand the district’s reputation with taxpayers. Since school districts have reputations, district officials must fully understand how they are perceived by the community. Florence stated, “Perception is the reality” (p. 6). If community stakeholders do not trust school district officials, passing a school bond referendum will be difficult. Consistent, transparent communication builds this trust. The success of a school district’s public relations strategies is critical to the success of passing a school bond referendum (Weathersby, 2002). Florence (2014) opined that, “Open, honest, transparent communication builds public confidence and trust in the district. In the absence of trust, so is an absence of supportive voters” (p. 15).

As leaders, superintendents are a major influence on whether a school district is perceived as trustworthy. Poynton, Kirkland, and Makela (2018) found that a key component of building trust in the community is being transparent about district issues. Superintendents who openly shared district challenges were viewed as authentic and trustworthy. Faltys (2006) found the district’s “actions must be straightforward and out in front of the public in all areas in order to gain the trust of those in the community” (p. 112). Khalifa et al. (2015) stated: “many

educators tend to forget that parent-school relations are a process, not a product” (p. 5). Khalifa, et al. also noted that:

Educators who venture out of the school setting to establish a constant and positive presence in the school’s community will significantly improve their relationship with parents and, ultimately, the education for children. This, in turn, will cause parents to trust and widely support their schools. (p. 5)

Trust in school officials is critical for the successful passage of a school bond referendum and gaining that trust is highly influenced by transparent communication and community involvement in the decision-making process on every aspect of the bond proposal. “The biggest difference between districts that had levies approved and those that did not were the extent to which the campaigns engaged community members” (Ingle et al., 2012, p.836). Literature supports the need for determining the level of trust that community stakeholders have in the school district. Before moving forward with a school bond referendum campaign, any issues of trust must be understood and dealt with transparently and authentically.

### ***Rationale***

Holt (1993), Weathersby (2002), Theobald and Meier (2002), and Benzaquen (2016) believe that voters will support school bond proposals as long as they understand the rationale. Benzaquen (2016) found personal communication that successfully framed the need for the bond referendum impacted successful passage. After the failed election on two previous school bond referendums, Erie school district was successful on their third attempt based on successful communication of the district’s facility needs. According to Benzaquen (2016), school district officials helped “stakeholders conceptualize the need for the bond referendum. How does it benefit students, staff and community? Humanistic value in seeing others in need will cause voters to support” (p. 135). Voters who truly understand the need for the bond referendum will support it.

Hanover Research (2012) found “voters are less likely to approve bond issues that include projects perceived as being ‘non-essential’” (p. 102). This study emphasized that districts must “clearly articulate” the rationale and ensure that rationale “reflects community priorities and is based on research” (p. 4). If voters see the importance and benefit of the proposed bond referendum, there is a better chance they will support it.

The rationale should include how the bond referendum meets the school district's long-term strategic plan and goals. “In the communication process, emphasis should be placed on relating the bond issue to educational goals” (Neill, 2003, p. 65). Neill found the school district that had success with the school bond referendum passage identified relating the bond issue to educational goals or the strategic plan as a top three priority. School districts that failed to pass a school bond referendum did not rate tying the rationale for the bond referendum to educational goals as a top five priority.

Dunbar (1991) concluded that school districts must clearly establish the need for new or update facilities “beyond a reasonable doubt” (p. 86). With that said, the rationale or need for the school bond referendum must be honestly communicated without exaggerating the ramifications of failure to approval. Supporters should not use “scare tactics” (Waters, 2004, p. 102). Godown (2010) emphasized that, “School leaders should not attempt to minimize or diminish the effect that increased taxes have on their constituents. Instead, it is far more practical to demonstrate how a newly renovated school will benefit the community as a whole” (pp. 87- 88). Poncelet (1999) further emphasized that district officials remember that voters are not voting on equitable financing of schools in the state, but rather voters are “expressing local preferences” (p. 92).



### ***Timing, Amount of Bond and Economic Impact***

To better understand school bond referendum success, election timing, the amount of the proposed bond election and current economic conditions of the school district seem to influence success.

Timing refers to placing the school bond referendum on the ballot during a local/special, primary, or general election. Timing also refers to placing the bond referendum on a ballot during an economic recession. A larger percentage of school district registered voters will show up at the polls during general elections, but may not be individuals who typically value public education, therefore, district officials may wish to consider scheduling a school bond referendum vote at a time other than a general election. (Ehrenberg et. al., 2003). Balzer (2015) opined, “the higher the voter turnout, the lower the chance of passing the bond election” (p. 267). Thusly, Balzer determined that planning the school bond election on the general election was detrimental to the success. Bauscher (1994) suggested school districts run special elections and steer clear of general elections or tax collecting periods. Bower et al. (2010) supported Bauscher’s (1994) finding that districts which held school bond elections later in the year had more success. Bower et al. (2010) felt increased debt from the holiday, tax season or the inclement weather of Michigan might have had a negative influence on school bond election success.

Kogan et al. (2018) found election timing does matter, but not necessarily because of taxes or increased holiday debt but rather was dependent on individual district factors and political contexts. Ingle et al. (2012) agreed to show placement on the ballot, timing of the election and other variables will not matter if leadership doesn’t consider “macro and micropolitical realities on the ground” (p. 848). This research supports the importance of a

thorough investigation into the perceptions of stakeholders in the DVSD to ensure school district officials understand the reality of why stakeholders are hesitant to support school bond elections.

Bower and Chen (2015) found that elections held during July or later and for which the millage proposal was the only issue on the ballot led to greater success. “Strong findings indicating that as voters are met with more and more choices to vote on, they either abstain or vote no on the choices that are further down the ballot as they tire of making selections” (p. 189). Bowers and Chen (2015) supported that placement on the ballot does play a role in successful school bond referendums.

Research suggests that economic conditions play a vital role in school bond referendum success. Those economic conditions vary from district to district and year to year. Godown (2010) argued that, “often a successful referendum depends on whether or not the voters feel they can afford the tax increase. A superintendent should attempt a referendum vote when the economy is strong” (p. 93). Dunbar (1991) Nehls (1991) and Poncelett (1999) concurred that economic status, poverty level, and the financial amount of the school bond referendum indeed impacted a school district’s ability to successfully pass a bond referendum. Dunbar (1991) further stressed that a variety of economic factors impact school bond referendum success including the mill levy rate, impact on the tax amount, other community or county capital improvements financed by residential taxpayers and pending reappraisal of property taxes. Poncelet (1999) Florence (2014) and Benzaquin (2016) found the overall cost or mill levy increase of the school bond does influence whether or not voters will support it. But also the election characteristics such as time of year, current mill rate, legislative laws, election type, voter history, and voter demographics impact school bond success as well.

Rural school districts with fewer housing developments and commerce generate less tax revenue, which appears to hinder support for school bond referendums, therefore school districts with low property values struggle to pass bond referendums to finance new educational facilities. Poncelet (1999) suggested, “regions with broader, more diverse tax bases that can generate far more revenue with fewer mills pass a great percentage of their school tax issues” (p. 83). Theobald and Meier (2002) concurred and proposed that higher property values usually indicate a larger tax base, therefore the impact on the proposed bond is less per household and more likely to pass. Holt (2017) concurred if bond referendum mill levy proposals exceed \$2.00 per \$1,000 of property value, the result is a drastic reduction in taxpayer support. The issue of lower property values is compounded by lower incomes for families who cannot afford increased taxes to fund schools. The median income for citizens in rural school districts is less than urban districts.

Zimmerman (2019) shared:

Public schools in rural Minnesota receive \$683 per pupil less than their counterparts in the metro area, according to a new data analysis released today by MREA. This stems from a large and pervasive gap in the median household income that is \$23,422 less in rural Minnesota than the metro area, according to the analysis of data from the U.S. Census 2017 American Community Survey.

Suffice to say, school districts such as the DVSD must thoroughly understand the current economic condition within the school district and whether or not voters will support a school bond referendum before ever putting it on the ballot. Dunbar (1991) agreed stressing, “Timing is important” (p. 83).

### ***Opposition Factor***

While a variety of research paths have been conducted on school bond referendums and recommendations, Benzaquin (2016) focused his research on a Wisconsin school district that

failed to pass two bond elections, followed by successfully passing a third bond referendum for relatively the same amount. His desire was to find out what the difference was between the three attempts. Benzaquin (2016) determined that a unanimous board of education support was critical, and transparent communication with community stakeholders should be an emphasis. During the first two referendums, stakeholders felt ignored as district leadership lead the charge, but during the third referendum, community stakeholders lead the charge and promoted the rationale for support of the school bond referendum. The result was a successful bond election. Benzaquin (2016) contended that school district officials created distrust with community stakeholders by only inviting known supporters of the school bond election to referenda presentations.

Benzaquin's (2016) suggest that school districts who do not allow community stakeholder to lead the school bond referendum campaign risk allowing the opposition to lead the community in a fashion that pits the community against school district leadership. Mobley (2007) even warns that organized opposition has a detrimental effect on school bond election success, therefore the opposition should not be ignored.

Godown (2010) suggested, "too much persuasion to win over the 'no' vote might force the opposition to unite against the referendum causing a block of voters against the project" (p. 92). Holt (2017) advised "when proponents of the proposal failed to identify negative attitudes and address them, opposition groups emerged" (p. 22). Holt (1993) states "Negative attitudes toward the curriculum, quality of education, or school personnel on the part of segments of the community can have an adverse effect on the outcome of the elections unless steps are taken early on to alleviate the problems" (p. 120).

The key to gaining school bond referendum support from the opposition appears to be ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders during the entire process. School districts must

encourage all community stakeholders to lead the charge through the promotion of their campaign strategies. Focusing on the opposition brings more attention to the opposition rather than attention on the supporters of the school bond referendum. Research does indicate that school district officials should address the concerns of the opposition rather than avoid it, however, avoid confrontations or arguments with the non-supporters.

### ***Quid Pro Quo***

Quid pro quo is defined by “something given or received for something else” *Merriam-Webster (2020)*. Speculation on the impact of quid pro quo on school bond election success is nothing new. Adams (2017) suggested that school district officials wishing to successfully pass a school bond referendum must distribute funds equally across the district. As a result of examining the successful passage of school bond elections in 23 Mississippi school districts, Weathersby (2002) concluded that school districts must provide benefits from the school bond issue to most, if not all schools in the district because it encourages voter turnout and support. Theobald and Meier (2002) concurred that voters are more likely to vote in support of a school bond referendum if their children were directly impacted by passage. Godown (2010) surveyed 512 of 604 superintendents in New Jersey and found there was a better chance of school bond election success if all students in the district benefited as a result of its passage. Consistent with these findings, Hanover Research (2012) determined, “Voters are more likely to support bond issues from which they stand to benefit directly” (p. 3) and “increasing the beneficiaries of projects can increase the likelihood of bond acceptance” (p. 6). School bond referendum plans should provide benefits for most or all schools in the district. Doing so will encourage parents and teachers to get out a vote (Weathersby, 2002). Godown (2010) found consensus among superintendents who indicated when all students in a school district benefit from a school bond

referendum, it has a moderate to strong influence on the bond referendum success. The Hanover Research (2012) opined that “voters are more likely to support school bond issues from which they stand to benefit directly” (p. 3). Furthermore, the Hanover Research (2012) noted the difficulties of passing school bond issues if a district is comprised of three cities attempting to solicit funding from the entire district to fund school upgrades in one city, which will not have an immediate impact for stakeholders in the other two cities. It was also noted this can be an issue in smaller rural districts as well Hanover Research (2012).

Although a relatively new term to school bond referendum research, the literature does support quid pro quo strategies for the successful passage of bond elections, especially for school districts that have consolidated and have multiple towns with multiple buildings. The DVSD encompasses three different counties and four different towns. The residents of each town and county have their own agendas, thoughts, and desires about what is important for their community and children. Quid pro quo strategies should be investigated further to determine the impact on school bond referendum success.

### ***School Funding and State Aid History in Kansas: An Overview***

The process of funding public schools is unique to individual states. Thompson et al. (2019) examined the history of school finance for each state and indicated that Kansas began funding elementary schools in 1937, followed by aid to secondary schools in 1955. Kansas enacted its first state finance formula in 1965, soon after the consolidation of school districts in the 1960s reduced the total number of districts from approximately 2,800 to only 311. The following list includes a brief history of school finance in Kansas.

**1965 – School Foundation Act (SFA)** – “established a state duty to fund schools and acknowledged the need to better equalize educational opportunities among districts” (Thompson et al., 2019, p. 266).

**1973 – School District Equalization Act (SDEA)** - This particular legislature allowed “wide differences in tax rates and expenditures” (Thompson & Clark, n.d., p. 1). Thompson, et al. (2019) referred to SDEA as a “reward-for-effort formula”, which implied that state aid would follow if local effort to raise taxes were approved (p. 166). SDEA was regarded as a power equalization formula because it addressed the inequities between poor and wealthy school districts by allowing school districts to tax and spend as if it has the same local property tax base.

**1992 – School District Finance and Quality Performance Act (SDFQPA)** essentially established a bottom line “floor” funding amount and “cap” amount on per-pupil revenue. Wealthier school districts with higher assessed valuation generate far more tax revenue per mill than less wealthy school districts, therefore all Kansas school districts were required to have a mill levy rate of 20. School districts could go higher than 20 to fund local projects but tax revenues generated from the 20 mills go directly to the state of Kansas to help equalize educational opportunities for students throughout the state. A base amount per pupil was established for all school districts, but weighted factors including, but not limited to, students considered at-risk (including a factor for high-density at-risk), special education, high enrollment, declining enrollment, or # of students transported on a bus 2.5 miles or further altered the total amount of funding per student per school district. The intent was to equalize funding to school districts with less tax valuation so they could offer equal educational opportunities as compared to the wealthier school districts with a higher tax valuation. This is explained in more detail in the School Equity and Enhancement Act (SEEA) of 2017.

**2015 – Classroom Learning Assuring Student Success Act (CLASS)** locked state aid amounts for public school districts through 2017. This legislation was a response to “economic distress tied to steep state tax reductions and political change” (Thompson et.al., 2019, p. 266)

**2017 – School Equity and Enhancement Act (SEEA)** essentially brought back much of SDFQPA funding guidelines including the weighting factors. Base Aid for Student Excellence (BASE) equals the base amount provide to all school districts in Kansas per each student enrolled. This is more commonly known as the full-time equivalent (FTE) and represents the amount all school district receives, plus any adjustments made due to weighting factors mentioned earlier. Once all enrollment and weighted factors have been tabulated, the Total Foundation Aid (TFA) is established. Once this number has been established, the state of Kansas takes into consideration the total amount of local tax or local effort generated by each school district. For school districts that generate more tax revenues due to their high assessment valuation, they receive a lesser percentage of state aid than a rural or potentially non-urban school district with lower assessed property values. It is important to note that each of these legislative school finance plans has been “vigorously litigated” (Thompson et.al., 2019, p. 266). This remains true today as the Kansas Supreme Court has expressed concerns on whether SDFQPA does enough or is adequate for properly funding schools, especially in terms of addressing inflation.

### ***Kansas Statutes Impacting the Funding of School Bonds***

Current statutes that impact bond elections include 72-5461, adopted in 2016 and launched in 2017-2018, which places limitations on approval of elections. The statute limits the aggregate amount of a school district’s total general obligation bonds, eligible for capital state aid, to no more than \$175,000,000. Districts which have not passed a bond election in the past 25



years are exempt from this statute. Statute 72-5457 limits Kansas school districts with bond debt limitations of 14% of their assessed valuation of the taxable tangible property unless otherwise approved by the state. “The assessed valuation is computed by taking the market value of the property and multiplying it by the appropriate assessment factor for that class of property” (Kansas Department of Education, 2020). Class of property example includes, but is not limited to, residential property, farmland, and business.

Statute 74-5462 provides guidelines for state capital improvement aid to individual school districts based on the assessed valuation per pupil (AVPP) of that school district. The AVPP is determined by dividing the total assessed valuation of the school district by the district’s enrollment. In Kansas, the “assessed valuation per pupil ranges from just over \$1,000 in Ft. Leavenworth, a military installation with almost no taxable property, to over \$500,000 in Burlington, home of the state’s only nuclear power plant” (Tallman, 2020). According to this statute, the state of Kansas will pay 75 percent of the bond payment for the school district with the lowest AVPP. Once the lowest AVPP is established, the percent of state aid decreases by 1% for each \$1,000 increase in AVPP. Considering Ft. Leavenworth’s AVPP of \$1,000, it could receive 75% state aide for bond referendum payments. Adding 1% for each \$1,000 over this base number would mean no school district with an AVPP of over \$76,000 would receive state capital aid for bond payments. Since all school districts in Kansas are required to have a 20 mill rate, wealthy districts help fund poor districts. This equalization formula allows school districts who receive more capital state aid to lower the total number of mills required to fund their project due to taxes raised from wealthy school districts.

Legislators in Kansas have recently proposed modification to this statute. State officials recognize that as school district AVPP’s annually increase, Ft. Leavenworth’s AVPP continues

to remain stagnant, resulting in fewer school districts that qualify for capital state aid based on how this formula works. “For the current school year, 127 districts were eligible to receive state aid for general obligation bonds. The number of eligible districts is expected to drop below 100 within five years” (Smith, 2020). To address this concern, in February of 2020, the Kansas state senate unanimously approved a bill that would remove the Ft. Leavenworth school district from the formula, as well as virtual school students from around the state. “As a result, 175 districts would be eligible for aid” (Smith, 2020). Tallman (2020) emphasizes that districts that receive more state aid still require a higher mill levy than wealthy districts due to the amount of tax revenue generated from much lower total assessed property valuations.

### ***Rural School Bond Election History in Kansas***

Dissertation and peer-reviewed journal research (within the past five years) on school bond referendum success and/or failure is limited. Research-based solely on rural Kansas school districts is even more limited. Kraus (2009) researched six Kansas school districts. His research focused on community stakeholder opinions from a large, medium and small school districts that had successfully passed a bond referendum and one large, medium and small school district that had failed to pass a bond referendum. Survey and interview participants included the school district superintendent, a member of the bond campaign committee, the local newspaper editor and a local banker. Kraus noted that this same selection strategy was utilized by Holt (1993) and Lode (1999) in their research on bond elections. Four participants from each school district completed a 32-item survey and an interview. However, with only four participants from each district, this research lacks a holistic view from community stakeholders, especially the opposition whose perceptions of why the bond referendum failed may be vastly different than the superintendent, campaign committee member, banker, and local newspaper editor. More research

on the opposition is warranted, especially when determining how to resolve this problem of practices in the DVSD.

Bohrer (1998), superintendent of a rural school district in south-central Kansas, shared his experience of gaining voter support in passing a bond election for a new elementary school after the previous two attempts had failed. Much of Bohrer's (1998) success involved thorough and transparent communication, recruitment of non-district personnel supporters to a campaign, and the establishment of a long-term strategic plan by a committee with stakeholder representation from all four district towns. At first glance, this school district seems similar to the DVSD in terms of demographics and geographic breakdown of four feeder towns. Bohrer (1998) noted support from "a Christian elder who is politically conservative and known for a serious sense of humor and his willingness to be so visible in the election process was all the more powerful" (p. 11). Bohrer (1998) also noted this influential farmer/rancher's support as critical since he will pay more taxes than most anyone else in the school district. Bohrer (1998) was clear about the impact community stakeholders had in promoting this third and successful bond referendum.

Kraus (2009) included two smaller Kansas school districts in his research, one that failed and one that successfully passed a bond election; Bohrer (1998) specifically addressed one rural school district's pursuit in passing a bond referendum. Kraus' (2009) and Bohrer's (1998) research applies to three rural Kansas school districts, which may or may not have similarities to the DVSD. "We must stress that there are limits to any conclusions drawn. All politics are local. Examples in every context exist of certain districts that defy the odds and manage to get school bonds passed even in difficult circumstances" (Bowers et al., 2010, p. 414). This finding was further supported by data provided by Dr. Craig Neuenswander, Director of School Finance for

the Kansas Department of Education. Dr. Neuenswander (2020) shared the Kansas bond referendum election history from the past 10 years. The unpublished Excel documents were examined to determine if any noticeable trends in passage or failure of bond elections might emerge within different characteristics of school districts in Kansas. Between 2009 and 2019, Kansas school districts proposed 201 bond elections. Tables were created from the data provided by Dr. Neuenswander. Table 1 illustrates a majority of bond referendum proposals in the state of Kansas between 2009 and 2019 were successful.

**Table 1**  
*Bond Referendum Proposals*

Measure	n	Percentage of Total
Total Fails (all districts)	70	35%
Total Passed (all districts)	131	65%
Total Districts (all districts)	201	100%

*Note.* N= 201. Success/fail rate of school districts who proposed a bond election between 2009 and 2019.

### ***Student Enrollment Impact on Bond Election Success in Kansas***

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the difference between smaller school districts with enrollments below 1,000 to districts with enrollments above 1,001. These data support the difficulty that smaller rural school districts have in passing bond referendums. Districts with enrollments of more than 1,000 students experienced an 80% success rate with bond elections as compared to just over half, 53% of school districts with enrollments of less than 1,000 students.

**Table 2***Total FTE of 1,000 students or below*

Measure	n	Percentage of Total
Districts below 1,000 FTE to Fail	54	47%
Districts below 1,000 FTE to Pass	60	53%
Total Districts (all districts)	114	100%

*Note, N = 114. Success/fail rate of the school district with a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 1,000 students or less between 2009 and 2019.*

**Table 3***Total FTE of 1,001 students or higher*

Measure	n	Percentage of Total
Districts above 1,001 FTE to Fail	17	20%
Districts above 1,001 FTE to Pass	70	80%
Total Districts (all districts)	87	100%

*Note. N=87. Success/fail rate of the school district with a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 1,000 students or above between 2009 and 2019.*

### ***Impact of Repeat Attempts to Pass a Bond Election in Kansas***

Tables 4 and 5 compare the success rate of all Kansas school districts which failed on their first bond election attempt but proposed another bond referendum within this 10-year time frame. Some districts presented voters with the second bond election within the same year, while others did so within two. Some districts presented multiple bond elections within this 10-year window and were successful with all. While a large percentage of school districts with 1000 students or more successfully passed a second bond election (73%), school districts with fewer than 1,000 students were far less successful. (32%).

**Table 4**

*Success rate if district with FTE of 1,000 or less proposed additional bond referendum after failure*

Measure	n	Percentage of Total
Districts with 1,000 FTE or less to fail on 2 <sup>nd</sup> or more attempts.	38	68%
Districts with 1,000 FTE or less to Pass on 2 <sup>nd</sup> or more attempts.	18	32%
Total Districts (all districts)	56	100%

*Note. N = 56. Success/fail rate of school districts with a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 1,000 or less who proposed an additional bond referendum after an initial bond referendum failed.*

**Table 5**

*Success rate if district with FTE of 1,001 or more proposed 2nd bond referendum after failure.*

Measure	n	Percentage of Total
Districts above 1,001 FTE to fail on 2 <sup>nd</sup> or more attempt.	13	27%
Districts above 1,001 FTE to pass on 2 <sup>nd</sup> or more attempt.	36	73%
Total Districts (all districts)	49	100%

*Note. N = 49. Success/fail rate of school districts with a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 1,001 or more who proposed an additional bond referendum after an initial bond referendum failed.*

### ***State Aid Impact on Bond Election Success in Kansas***

Tables 6, 7 and 8 analyzed the impact of state aid on bond referendum success. Between the years of 2009 and 2019, 24% was the average capital improvement state aid amount. Table 6 illustrates school districts which receive 24% or less state aid experienced a 53% success rate, while table 7 supports the impact of state aid on successful bond elections with a 74% success rate when the state aid is 25% or more. Table 8 illustrated the impact on school district bond election success when \$0 state aid was involved. These data could suggest that state aid below 24% has little, if any, impact on bond election success, yet I would caution this assumption since there could be many other variables involved such as, but not limited to, communication and

trust issues with school district decision making, amount of the bond proposal, timing of the bond election or current economic factors.

**Table 6**

*Capital Improvement Aid 24% or less*

Measure	24% state aid or less	Percentage of Total
Total Fails (all districts)	43	47%
Total Passed (all districts)	49	53%
Total Districts (all districts)	92	100%

*Note.* N = 92. Success/fail rate of school districts who would have received 24% state aid or less.

**Table 7**

*Capital Improvement Aid 25% or more*

Measure	25% state aid or higher	Percentage of Total
Total Fails (all districts)	27	25%
Total Passed (all districts)	80	74%
Total Districts (all districts)	107	100%

*Note.* N = 107. Success/fail rate of school districts who received 25% state aid or more.

**Table 8**

*Capital Improvement Aid 0%*

Measure	25% state aid	Percentage of Total
Total Fails (all districts)	23	47%
Total Passed (all districts)	26	53%
Total Districts (all districts)	49	100%

*Note.* N=49. Success/fail rate of school districts who would have received 0% aid if a *bond election were successful*.

Tables 9 and 10 compare the bond election success of school districts with an average valuation per pupil (AVPP) above and below the AVPP state mean. This illustrates that school districts with a lower AVPP have more success with bond elections than school districts with a

higher AVPP. Considering the formula for state capital aid is based on the AVPP, this data again supports the notion of more state aid, the better chance of a successful bond election.

**Table 9**

*AVPP State Mean and below*

Measure	71,413	Percentage of Total
District Below AVPP Mean to Fail	34	25%
District Below AVPP Mean to Pass	101	75%
Total Districts (all districts)	135	100%

*Note.* N = 135. Success/fail rate of school districts whose Assessed Valuation Per Pupil was below the state assessed valuation per pupil mean of 71,413.

**Table 10**

*AVPP State Mean and above*

Measure	71,413	Percentage of Total
District Above AVPP Mean to Fail	37	55%
District Above AVPP Mean to Pass	30	45%
Total Districts (all districts)	67	100%

*Note.* N=67. Success/fail rate of school districts whose Assessed Valuation Per Pupil was above the state assessed valuation per pupil mean of 71, 413.

Of the 23 school districts with enrollments of 1,000 or more, which proposed multiple bond elections, only two experienced failure in passing a school bond election. 13 of these school districts were successful every time they attempted a bond election. When analyzing every bond election proposed by these districts (a total of 50), 37 of 50 or 74% of the elections were successful.

Of the 25 school districts with enrollments of 1,000 or less, which proposed multiple bond elections, eight never experienced success and only one school district successfully passed a bond referendum each time. When analyzing every bond election proposed by these districts, (a total of 57), only 18 of 57 or 32% were successful. These data support the struggles that smaller



school districts have in passing bond elections. The question is why? What variables impact these data and are those variables unique to each district?

With such limited research on bond referendums in rural Kansas school districts, much can be learned from further investigation into both the supporters and the opposition. Since factors that influence the outcome of a bond referendum are malleable from district to district, this investigation should be holistic and include more than school district officials and community stakeholders who support the bond referendum. A thorough investigation into the opposition is critical in understanding who will or will not support the bond election. The research of this dissertation will analyze the factors and variables that are unique to the DVSD.

### **Conceptual Framework**

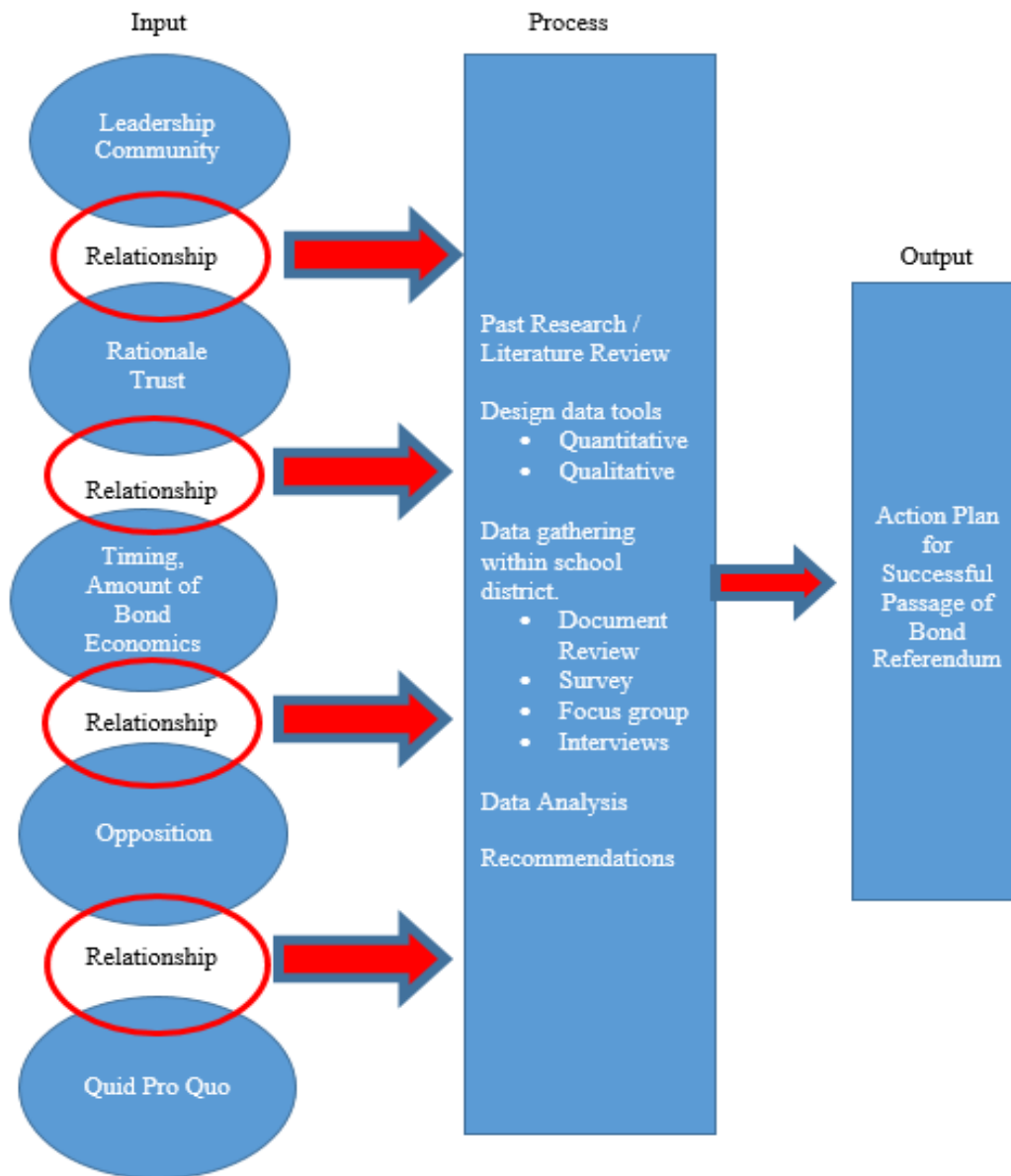
Because of my 25-year employment in the DVSD, understanding what factors contribute to a successful school bond referendums has become a passion. This district has experienced success in passing a major bond election only once in the past 52 years. Additionally, I attended a K-12 school in a different rural Kansas school district that has failed on multiple attempts over the past 46 years to pass school bond elections for new facilities. Determining why this phenomenon occurs will help DVSD successfully pass a bond election in response to anticipated enrollment increases. Those enrollment increases are associated with future housing developments within the school district boundary lines.

The purpose of this study is to examine factors influencing the support of bond referendums in the DVSD. The goal of this literature review was to understand past research to provide direction for the methodology of this research. Schrom (2004) emphasized the importance of understanding perceptions from community stakeholders when promoting a school bond referendum. Benzaquin (2016) and Hanover Research (2012) emphasize the need for

school districts to research their community perceptions to better understand which strategies would be most beneficial in the pursuit of successfully passing a school bond referendum. With this in mind, it seems imperative to conduct a broad study over past school bond election failures and the one successful school bond election. Determining perceptions of all stakeholders regarding the need for a school bond referendum in the DVSC is vital. “Since each community has unique needs, demographics alone cannot predict the outcome of a referendum” (Hiller and Spradlin, 2010, p. 9).

Determining the relationship between many variables mentioned in this literature review would be beneficial to the DVSD. This can be done by reviewing the demographic voting results of past school bond elections, how the school bond campaign strategies were different in each of the three bond elections and a thorough, holistic investigation into the perceptions of all stakeholders in the DVSD. This includes all demographic stakeholders from younger adults, older adults and senior citizens with no children attending the DVSD. It also includes those who supported and those who opposed past bond referendums.

## Concept Map



**Figure 2**

*Illustration of the path of this proposed research*

## Chapter Summary

While school bond referendum research is significant, much of the existing research involves the investigation of two or more school districts that have successfully passed or failed a school bond referendum. A multitude of researchers focused on multiple school district success and failure in their respective states (Dunbar, 1991; Holt, 1993; Poncelet, 1999; Neill, 2003; Theobald & Meier, 2002; Weathersby, 2002; Faltys, 2006; Kraus, 2009; Godown, 2010; Hanover Research, 2012; Bowers and Lee, 2013; and Florence, 2014). Others focused their investigation on an individual school district within their respective states (Schrom, 2004; Waters, 2004; Mobley, 2007; Russo, 2010; Benzaquen, 2016; and Adam, 2017). Regardless of whether the focus was on the success or failure of one or multiple school districts, chosen participants in studies were overwhelming school superintendents, steering committee members or community members selected by school leaders. Holt (2017) identified the most consistent variable contributing to school bond success “was a lack of understanding of attitudes and perceptions within the community and educate staff about the schools” (p. 40).

Each school district has its own culture, identity and stakeholder perception that influence the success of a bond referendum. Due to the autonomy of each school district, there needs to be more effort in gathering and understanding the perceptions of all voters, not just individuals identified by the superintendent. Schrom (2004) found that school districts relied too heavily on consultants rather than their own quantitative and qualitative data. Godown (2010) recognized that although it is important to have district and faculty representation, it is more important to seek out representation from a diverse group of stakeholders from the community. More research on a diverse group of stakeholders from all corners of the school district should provide more detailed information and strategies to successfully promote the passage of a bond referendum.

Understanding the relationship between each emerging theme in the research is critical in future bond referendum success. In the DVSD, how does “*leadership*” and “*communication*” impact trust in the rationale for the need for a bond referendum? Does the “*timing, amount of the mill levy and district economic statue*” impact support for the bond election? Based on campaign strategies and past bond elections results in the DVSD, did “*Quid Pro Quo*” strategies impact the outcome of the bond referendum? Do current community stakeholders expect improvements to each facility as a justification for supporting a bond referendum?

Qualitative research on school bond election success and failure are focused mostly on the perceptions of superintendents and a few community stakeholders. Additional qualitative research that is needed represents the majority of community taxpayers, including members of the community who no longer have children attending the local school district. Quantitative data, such as a Likert-scale survey, can appropriately capture community perception derived from a large group of stakeholders. Additionally, focus group interviews with school district site councils or community members who volunteer to participate can provide needed qualitative data to better understand community perceptions (as a whole) regarding the need for a school bond referendum.

One important aspect of gathering this perceptual data is to better understand if stakeholders have a preference for where the new facilities should be located. Should the new facilities be additions to our current facilities or should the DVSD build completely new facilities? Will stakeholders support a school bond referendum that proposes new facilities on farmland near the new NCAA division one athletic complex? The anticipated housing developments near this location would support substantial enrollment growth, yet school district stakeholders may prefer keeping facilities within the city limits of one of the four towns. This is

a particular area of research that could be significant in helping the DVSD determine how to successfully pass a school bond referendum.

Based on a review of the existing research, it appears that there are gaps in the literature in the following areas:

1. District leadership versus community stakeholder leadership. There is substantial research on the impact of leadership on school bond election success, however, the autonomy of each school district plays an important part in success. The DVSD has its own political landscape and what applies to other studies, may not apply to the DVSD.
2. A holistic view of all school district stakeholders concerning support for new or improved facilities. Much of the research data was collected from superintendents and supporters of the school bond elections.
3. How detrimental or beneficial are “*quid pro quo*” strategies in rural school districts? Do small rural school districts with multiple feeder towns expect updates or portion of the bond referendum to benefit all children at every level?

Chapter Three will identify the research methods utilized in this study, which will seek to examine the previously mentioned shortcomings in the research as it applies to the DVSD.

Recognition of the perceptual autonomy of individual rural school districts in Kansas is critical. With few studies available on bond referendums in Kansas, additional research is needed. Since one size (a study) does not fit all, this study will specifically address the perceptions and history of school bond elections in the DVSD. With the completion of this study, the DVSD can make informed decisions on how to proceed towards a successful future bond election.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine factors that influence stakeholder support of a school bond referendum in the Delaware Valley School District (DVSD). The perceptions held by major district stakeholders regarding the rationale for supporting a proposed mill levy increase appears to be instrumental to a successful passage. Additionally, the amount of the proposed tax increase required to meet the school bond election greatly impacts the success of a bond referendum (Dunbar, 1991). There is substantial research on why school district officials and campaign committee members feel school bond elections pass and fail. Kraus (2009) studied six school districts in Kansas. One small, one medium and one large enrollment district that had recently passed a school bond election and one small, one medium and one large enrollment district that had recently failed to pass a school bond election. Neill (2003) studied effective and ineffective bond election campaign strategies in Kansas school districts based on the perceptions of the district leader, most commonly the superintendent. Dunbar (1991) studied the impact of mail-in ballots on multiple school districts in Kansas. Godown (2010), Florence (2014), Holt (1993), Poncelet (1999), Theobald and Meier (2002), Weathersby (2002), Bowers and Lee (2013) all researched multiple school districts and the factors that influenced the success or failure in passing a bond referendum. Again, most of the research was focused on the perceptions of district leadership or campaign members. Considering past research's focus on district leadership or campaign member perceptions on factors that influenced the success or failure of a school bond referendum, there appears to be limited research on how school district taxpayers feel about supporting or opposing a school bond referendum. Taxpayers determine if school bond elections pass or fail, not superintendents or members of a steering committee who support

the bond proposal. Due to the unique variables within every school district across Kansas, it is difficult to apply data collected from multiple districts, whose challenges may be different than those faced by the DVSD. Each school district has its own identity, filled with unique challenges, such as socioeconomic, tension between stakeholders after school district consolidation years ago, and current mill levy rates that may already be high. A collective case study of all three bond elections (two of which failed) would be beneficial because it would allow an analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data to better understand the differences, even the evolution of voting results and perceptions over the past 20 years. Subjective survey data provides the ability to disaggregate by community or voting precinct. To better understand the reasons for the success and failure of these three bond elections, a collective case study methodology will be utilized in this research. Creswell (2007) identified collective case studies as “the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue” (p. 74). As such, multiple-case research provides a more in-depth or holistic view of all cases under investigation. The emerging data or evidence are considered more reliable as compared to a single case study (Heale & Twycross 2018). “In collective or multiple case studies, data collection needs to be flexible enough to allow a detailed description of each case to be developed, before considering the emerging similarities or differences in cross-case comparisons” (Crowe et al., para. 20, 2011). Quantitative data analysis acquired from questionnaire surveys provides an understanding of phenomena across demographic groups, while focus group interviews contribute a deeper understanding of the phenomena across the multiple cases under study (Flyvbjerg 2006). Investigation of past school bond election campaign strategies, voter precinct results, and perception of the opposition and supporters (based on newspaper clipping) will assist with understanding factors that influence stakeholders’ votes. For this study, the multiple cases will include two failed bond elections in



1998 and 1999, plus the failure to pass a tax increase associated with the recreation commission in 2019. The only successful DVSD bond election to pass (for a new facility) since 1968 will also be part of this case study.

The most accurate way to understand what impacts the success of school bond elections in the DVSD is through a mixed-methods research design. “Mixing during interpretation occurs when the quantitative and qualitative strands are mixed during the final step of the research process after the researcher has collected and analyzed both sets of data” (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Quantitative data acquired from disaggregated voting precinct results could provide a more in-depth understanding of the perceptions within each of the four school district townships. Conducting a Likert-scaled survey will provide greater statistical insight into the perceptions of multiple demographic groups such as age, occupation, parent/non-parent and homeowners as opposed to renters. This quantitative data can be analyzed to determine current voter perceptions and possible emerging trends which can be used to drive decisions on promoting a future school bond election. Qualitative data, gathered from focus groups or individual interviews should provide more in-depth information about the perceptions behind supporting bond referendums. Interviews allow the researcher to ask clarifying questions or to seek further information that could be valuable in planning a school bond election campaign. Creswell (2018) espoused that, “Connecting the data means that the analysis of one data set is used to lead into or build into the second data set” (p. 230). This mixed study will allow a qualitative study into the perceptions of participating district taxpayers and a quantitative study into the history of election results.

## Research Questions

The research questions guiding this case study include:

1. How do the rationales for a rural bond referendum impact passage?
2. What are the challenges of communicating rationales for a rural bond referendum?
3. What are leading community perceptions regarding tax increases to support building or updating facilities?

This chapter will include the rationale for this case study, the problem setting and context, the research sample and data sources, data collection and data analysis methods, trustworthiness, limitations, and delimitations.

### Rationale

Case studies have traditionally been used by qualitative researchers based on the desire to focus on the dynamic interactions within the context of their problem (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Marshall and Rossman (2016) opined that the strength of a case study is its nondiscriminatory methodology that includes quantitative data. By utilizing a convergent parallel design, the comparison and contrast of quantitative data to qualitative data allows the researcher to confirm emerging trends that suggest reasons taxpayers support or oppose school bond referendums. The DVSD has a variety of demographic groups that impact the outcome of each election, including, but not limited to parents of children attending the school district, non-parents, business owners, farmers, ranchers, and senior citizens. By virtue of this nondiscriminatory methodology, Marshall and Rossman (2016) believe that a case study can offer a voice to all groups simply by offering survey and interview questions that are worded in a manner that provokes honest feedback without judgment. Quantitative data such as past election documents, campaign flyers, letters to the local newspaper editor, the demographic breakdown of

each voting precinct from past elections, and a Likert-scaled survey can aid in understanding past failures and perceptions of future support for a bond election. Qualitative data (e.g., focus group and individual interviews) will aid in developing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of why DVSD taxpayers consistently choose to oppose mill levy elections.

Combining qualitative data with quantitative data provides a more comprehensive understanding of the problem of practice than one data collection method by itself (Creswell, 2007).

Because three of the past four mill levy increase elections have failed, each election is a mini-case study of its own. Creswell (2007) stated, “Case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context)” (p. 73). In this case study, there is an overarching bounded system (the school district), as well as several sub-bounded systems represented by each of the four towns within the school district. Understanding the perceptions and voting history within each of these sub-bounded systems is paramount to understanding this problem of practice. The researcher intends to take a social constructivism approach to this research. The rationale for this approach is to better understand how the perceptions of participants have developed over time and whether those perceptions were impacted socially or through historical norms (Creswell, 2007). Through questioning of research participants, inquiry will be made if the older generation of school district citizens impacted the views of younger citizens or those who recently moved into the school district? Are there underlying cultural issues or animosities associated with school district consolidation that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s? Are there concerns with trust towards the school district leadership? Do stakeholders understand the rationale or need for proposed bond issues? Considering the amount of research completed on perceptions held by school district leadership

or campaign steering committees, the ultimate goal of this study is to understand the perceptions of the district voters who control the success of a bond election.

### **Problem Setting/Context**

The context for this study is a rural school district located in Kansas. The 2019-2020 student population is 793. The school district's 153 square miles is located near a recreational lake, and close to larger cities in Kansas. Two major college campuses are within a 10-minute drive of this district's border. There are four geographically located towns within this school district. All four towns have a population of less than 1,000. Prior to 2005, children attended school in buildings located within all four towns. In 2003, the only school bond election to pass in the past 51 years resulted in the approval to build a new middle school. When this new facility opened in 2005, two elementary buildings located within two of the towns were closed. Currently, only two of the four towns maintain open school buildings. One town is home to an early childhood center (grades Pre-K and Kindergarten), the middle school (grades 5-8) and high school (grades 9-12). The other town is home to an elementary school (grades 1-4).

According to 2019 demographic data provided by the Kansas Department of Education (2019), 36.2. % of students qualify for free or reduced meals. The 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate was 94.3%. Race/ethnicity for this district is 88.3% white, 0.4% African-American, 5.2% Hispanic and 6.1% other. Twenty-one percent of the student population have an Individual Educational Plan. There are no migrant or English language learners. Finally, male students comprised 50.6% of the student population, while female students comprised 49.4%. The 2018 ACT average composite score was 22.8 as compared to the national average of 21.6. The five year ACT average from 2014-2018 was also 22.8. All teachers in the school district are fully licensed for the content they teach.

Over the past 51 years, this school district has passed two bond elections for new building facilities (1968 and 2004). The 1968 bond election was the result of a state-directed school district unification; therefore it could be argued that this successful bond election is an outlier. The need to create a new joint facility to house the students of both former school districts was compounded by a recent fire that destroyed the high school in one of the two communities. After the state-mandated consolidation, residents in the DVSD had no option other than to approve the bond referendum for the new high school. Over the past 25 years, three of four mill levy elections have failed. In 1998, the election failed 53.7% as opposed to 46.3% in favor. In 1999, the election failed 83% opposed and 17% in favor. The one election to pass occurred in 2004 with 61% in favor and 39% opposed. Most recently, in August of 2019, a mill levy increase election failed with 68% of the voters opposed and 38% in favor.

### **Research Sample and Data Sources**

The purpose of this study is to examine factors influencing stakeholder support of tax increases related to DVSD initiatives. There are research recommendations on how school districts should proceed after a failed bond election, but much of this research is based on school district officials or bond campaign leadership perceptions. It is the researcher's position that the best path to understanding this phenomenon is to focus on the perceptions of the taxpayers of the DVSD who ultimately determine the outcome of bond referendums.

The study will be initiated by gathering quantitative data. A Likert-scale survey will be offered to all community members (Appendix A). This survey intends to provide a holistic view of district stakeholders regarding district communication strategies as well as voter perception on tax increases to support the local school district. Due to the national trend of apathy in voter turnout for bond referendums, the participation rate for this survey will be one-third of the

registered voters in the DVSD. Additionally, the survey will attempt to elicit stakeholder perceptions regarding the school district's concerns on impending enrollment increases associated with housing and apartment developments located near the major university athletic complex. A statistical analysis of these data will provide percentage frequency for each question. Information can be disaggregated by selected demographic groups including town/precinct of residence, range of age, children in school, and job occupation. The online program Qualtrics<sup>®</sup> will be utilized to conduct this survey of district stakeholders. The results of this survey will be analyzed for developing trends and utilized to drive focus group interviews.

Documentation from past DVSD school bond elections will be examined. Documents include a demographic breakdown of votes by towns and voting precincts, promotional strategies, chosen leadership positions, possible *Quid Pro Quo* situations, and the specific plans of the proposed bond. The intent is to determine what factors were a catalyst for the successful bond election of 2004 and what factors were detrimental to the success of the 1998, 1999 and 2019 elections. More specifically, were *quid pro quo* strategies used to garner support from each of the four towns and/or voting precincts? Were promises made to make improvements to school buildings in each of the four towns? Overall superintendent perceptions in research are that bond elections that benefit all students in the district are more likely to pass (Godown, 2010). Part of this case study will be to determine if the voters feel the same way.

Qualitative perceptual data will be gathered through focus group studies. This data is used to better understand the beliefs, feelings or perceptions of stakeholders. Open-ended questions will be used to gather these qualitative data. To gather more in-depth data and understanding of stakeholder perceptions, the focus group studies will occur after the perceptual survey data has been gathered. Five focus groups will be identified to participate in interviews

(Appendix B). There will be one group from each town (i.e., Comiskey, Fenway, Shea, and Wrigley) in the school district, plus a fifth group (the District Site Council). Participants from the four towns will be selected using criterion sampling. The criteria used for sampling will include predetermined voter demographics within the school district. Those voter demographic will include: 1) The participant must be eligible to vote in an election; and 2) The participant must live within school district boundaries. Purposeful sampling will be the third selection criteria for participation in this group. To ensure a variety of taxpayer representation, five strata were selected. Those five strata include at least one participant with children attending DVSD, a participant who does not have children attending DVSD, a small business owner, a farmer/rancher and a senior citizen/retired. The researcher will seek to have an equal or near-equal distribution from each stratified group and purposely establish ground rules before the discussion begins. Those ground rules would include all participants will be respectful to the opinions of others, everyone should feel free to openly share opinions, and all will have the opportunity to further explain or share thoughts one-on-one after the group interview has ended. A point of emphasis is the research is simply gathering data, not trying to convince others to support or not support a bond referendum. Purposeful sampling ensures that specific tax-paying members from the community are represented in the study, thus ensuring the data sample represents a range of individuals with specific characteristics (Creswell 2018). Should equal or near-equal representation of each strata group become an issue, snowball sampling will be used to recruit equitable representation from each strata group.

Political concerns include potential distrust in the process due to the researcher's position in the school district. Are there unknown, underlying issues related to distrust of school district official in past bond elections? The researcher will need to thoroughly explain the rationale

behind my research, which is to gather accurate perceptions of taxpayers in the school district. With IRB approval (Appendix G), the research process and objective will be shared with the board of education. Information will be published on the school district social media page about this research, including recruitment of stakeholders and a reminder that all stakeholders have the opportunity to participate in the online survey should they wish to voice their opinion.

The researcher does not anticipate any ethical issues associated with this research but does recognize that some stakeholders may have concerns. Those issues include the confidentiality of stakeholder's voices and the accurate depiction of stakeholder perceptions. The process must be transparent from the start, with much work at the beginning focused on building a trusting relationship with participants through providing detailed information about the research and articulated answers to participant questions.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The purpose of this study is to examine factors that influence stakeholder support of a bond referendum in the DVSD. The researcher will utilize quantitative and qualitative inquiry methods.

Quantitative data will be collected via a survey using a Likert-scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral/No opinion, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The survey questions will seek to answer the research questions and to acquire a holistic perceptual view of the school district, by offering a survey to all school district taxpayers. The researcher will seek permission from the DVSD Board of Education to use emails from the student information system demographic contact page. Additionally, the email will include an invitation to share the survey with other school district stakeholders who may not have children attending school. District and building-level social media will also be utilized, as well as local business social media, to promote survey



participation. The goal is to get as many stakeholders to participate in the survey as possible, not simply stakeholders with children attending school. The Likert-scaled survey will be piloted by a group of non-residential adults who are familiar with the DVSC but not school district stakeholders. Adjustments and edits will be addressed after the pilot is complete.

Qualitative data will be collected through five focus group interviews which include school DSC committee members and one community group from each of the four towns (Fenway, Comiskey, Shea and Wrigley). Due to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and the Kansas mandate to shelter-in-place for the foreseeable future, all focus group interviews will occur through online Zoom Video Communications® meetings.

The ultimate goal of this study is to identify strategies that influence taxpayer support of tax increases that fund new school district facilities and initiatives. What factors or strategies contributed to the unsuccessful passage of a bond election? Do school district stakeholders understand the potential significance of developments in the southeast corner of the DVSD? To accomplish this, the researcher must first analyze past bond elections to determine if any patterns or emerging themes develop in response to the proposed bond. Additionally, the qualitative data collected in this research will assist with understanding of why taxpayers vote as they do. In the end, the data collected and analyzed from this mixed study will assist with recommendations for strategies that address the overall diverse desires of district stakeholders that generate support for future needed facilities.

### ***Data Analysis Methods***

#### **Quantitative Data.**

Understanding the perceptions of voter demographics could provide valuable answers to research questions. The categorical variables of the demographic groups within the DVSD

include job/profession, location of residence within the school district (town/precinct), age range, children in school, no children in school, and senior citizen. The researcher seeks to gather data that represents the perceptions of these demographic groups towards supporting or opposing tax increases that support school district facilities and/or initiatives.

The initial data analysis will be a document review of past bond election results acquired from the county courthouse. Campaign folder documents from the 1998, 1999 and 2004 elections will then be examined to determine if any trends or patterns are observed and believed to impact the election results. Do senior citizens support tax increases associated with school district initiatives? Do farmers and ranchers support tax increases? Are taxpayers with children attending the school district more likely to support tax increases as opposed to taxpayers without children attending the local school? If the answer to any of these questions is no, why? Additionally, are there variables that might impact voters' support? What trends, if any, emerge and how does the DVSD deal with those trends? What unexpected factors which impact bond success will emerge from the research data?

The researcher will then collect data via a Likert-scaled survey to better understand stakeholder perceptions regarding district practices and future district challenges. The Likert-scaled survey will be measured with an ordinal scale, (SA, A, N, SD, D). The dependent variable is the election itself and the independent variables will include the four towns located within the school district, the voting precincts and the voter demographics. The researcher will look for percentage trends that may evolve from this collected data which assist with understanding stakeholder perception towards supporting elections associated with mill levee increases.

**Qualitative Data:**

Inductive open coding will be used to initially analyze data gathered from focus group interviews. Audio recorded transcripts will be analyzed to determine emerging themes, trends, or patterns. These emerging data themes, trends or patterns will be given descriptive names.

Deductive focus coding will then be utilized to identify the most frequent or emerging themes related to participant perceptions towards bond elections and related tax increases. These data may become significant when correlated with themes, trends, and patterns emerging from the quantitative data. The same adults used in the Likert-scale survey pilot will participate in a focus group pilot.

***Trustworthiness***

To ensure that appropriate research protocols are followed while working with participants, the researcher will seek permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Arkansas before proceeding with participant research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided recommendations that address the threats of trustworthiness associated with qualitative research. Those recommendations include the establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To address credibility, the researcher must ensure that both the data and process of analyzing the data is an accurate interpretation of the participant's perception.

Transferability from one district to another can be difficult to address due to many variables associated with cultural and social relationships within rural districts in Kansas. While quantitative measures such as district enrollment numbers, free and reduced meal percentages, or school district tax valuation can be compared, perceptions of why a bond referendum failed or succeeded may be very different from one rural school district to another. Research data gathered

from one school district in Minnesota or Ohio may not apply to specific settings, situations, cultures in a school district in Kansas. In pursuit of the authenticity of information gathered in this study, collected data must come from the DVSD. By understanding stakeholder perceptions that impacted support or opposition to past school bond election, the information learned could help drive future school bond election promotional strategies that impact the success of the election. To establish transferability, the researcher must provide a detailed, descriptive analysis of the research process and findings. A detailed summary of the research should demonstrate how findings apply to future bond elections in the DVSD.

An important consideration of establishing dependability is researcher competency and expertise with the problem of practice. It is critical that the researcher is transparent with all concerns and information, and provides explicit detail about the process, data collected and findings, to avoid confusion or misinterpretations. An external audit of collected data and the interpretation of that data will ensure the dependability of the research. This external audit will be completed through collaboration and guidance by the researcher's dissertation chair, who will assist with determining whether the collected data supports the conclusions. The peer debriefing strategy could also be utilized in this audit. This audit intends to ensure the data matched the researcher's conclusions and the summary of that conclusion is presented in an understandable format.

Confirmability of research can be accomplished through the triangulation of data. The researcher will conduct a mixed-methods study where quantitative and qualitative data will be combined with determining themes and trends that impact the problem of practice. To provide a well-rounded comprehensive study, both qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed together. Neither type of data is considered inferior to the other. The two should complement each other.

Reflexivity also plays an important part in confirmability. The researcher must consistently consider how the investigative process and acquired data or knowledge relates to the problem of practice. Communicating the results of the data must reflect the actual data rather than perceptions held by the researcher. This is accomplished by reflexivity practices. The researcher must be able to demonstrate the ability to monitor and make needed adjustments to the research process as data potentially dictates (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By journaling thoughts throughout the process, saving and archiving previous drafts, and consistently reflecting on the process, the researcher will ensure that data collected applies to the research questions.

Prolonged engagement is a recommended strategy by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and should be a strength of the study due to the researcher's long term standing as an employee of the school district resulting in an appreciation and understanding of this problem of practice. A second recommended strategy is the triangulation of data, meaning more than one data set will be collected. This will be accomplished by the nature of the mixed methods study and the resulting correlation of collected data to summarize the research findings. A third recommendation is "peer debriefing" or sharing investigative results with a peer to ensure that all considerations are provided due diligence. Peer debriefing will be accomplished through a monthly dialogue conducted with a retired educator who no longer lives within the DVSD. The fourth recommendation is negative or deviant case analysis. This is an ongoing process whereby the researcher analyzes specific data that seem to contradict or fail to support the emerging data. When emerging data does not seem to support previously established patterns or themes, the researcher must continue searching for the cause or explicitly explain the emerging concern.

Confidentiality measures must be in place so that all participants are confident that the information shared will remain as such. Online surveys will be anonymously obtained. Focus

group interviews will include a brief description to participants on how data will be stored (Google folder) during the research process, then deleted three years after the successful defense of this research dissertation. Participants will be assured that only the dissertation committee members, the peer debrief partner and the researcher will have access to any data during the research process.

A diagram of the research steps and the process is included in Appendix D.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Although all stakeholders will be encouraged to participate in the perceptual survey, it is recognized that participation rates could be limited, and the researcher cannot guarantee a specific percentage of participants. Due to this, the survey will represent only a sampling size of perceptions held by residents of the school district. Considering the history of lower voter participation on school bond elections across the United States, the participation goal for this survey will be one-third of register voters. “Despite not generalizing to the entire population, research from qualitative studies can help to make important decisions and suggest applications to a broader population (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 138). Furthermore, limitations lie within the school bond election voting history (i.e Table 11). It does not include potential voters who did not vote in the particular election, nor does this table include new residents to the school district who were not residents at the time of the vote. The questions designed for the focus groups seek to elicit the participant’s views of district perceptions. However, it is important to note the focus group interviews are simply a sampling of district stakeholder perceptions as a whole. A final limitation of this study involves participants of the online survey. Anyone with the link can complete this survey so there is no guarantee that all participants are actual DVSC stakeholders who live within the school district boundary.

The availability of school bond referendum research is abundant. Much of the previous school bond research focused on the strategies utilized by school districts who have experienced success or failure with bond elections. Specifically, a vast majority of the research focuses on district leadership including the superintendent, school board or bond campaign committee members. To more accurately understand the perceptions of the taxpayers who ultimately approve tax increases, delimitation include focusing solely on these taxpayers and residents of the school district, rather than school district officials. Classified and certified staff will not participate in this study unless they are residents of the school district and eligible to vote in a school district bond election.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to examine factors that influence stakeholder support of tax increases associated with DVSD initiatives. To gain an understanding of this phenomenon, data will be collected from taxpayer stakeholders who reside within the DVSD. The study will begin with a thorough investigation of campaign documents from the 1998, 1999 and 2004, and 2019 elections. Demographic voting results will also be analyzed to determine if any trends exist. Data collected from this investigation will be classified by how it applies to each research question. Once this quantitative data has been analyzed, the proposed perceptual survey will go through a final review/edit to determine if questions thoroughly address emerging information. An online survey will be offered to all taxpaying stakeholders within the school district. The data collected from this survey will then be synthesized and to answer the research questions. Finally, focus group and individual interviews will be conducted to summarize and confirm findings from the previously collected quantitative data. The concluding step of this research will be the

correlation of all collected data into a summary of recommendations that will drive a future school bond referendum campaign for the DVSD.



## Chapter Four: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine factors impacting stakeholder support of a school bond referendum held in a rural Kansas school district. Considerable research has been done on school bond referendum elections in public schools in the United States, yet a majority of this research has focused disproportionately on the perceptions of campaign supporters, including superintendents, local bankers, and steering committee members. Due to a lack of research attention paid to actual stakeholder perceptions pertaining to school bond elections, this research focuses on voter perceptions in a small rural school district located in the state of Kansas.

This chapter will present data from a mixed-methods study in three sections. Section One will include a comparative analysis of campaign documents/artifacts from three school bond referendums spanning over a six-year period. The three school bond referendums occurred in 1998, 1999 and 2004, respectively. Bowen (2009) states, “Documents can be analysed [*sic*] as a way to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources” (p. 30). Artifacts analyzed in this study included board of education minutes, campaign flyers, newspaper clippings and voting results broken down by individual voting precincts. The intent of this comparison is to examine differences among the three campaigns to better understanding potential factors influencing the successful passage of the 2004 school bond campaign. The information learned from these artifacts will be combined with quantitative data from a stakeholder survey as well as qualitative data acquired from focus group interviews. This triangulation of data will be utilized to better understand the factors that influence stakeholder support of a school bond referendum in the Delaware Valley School District (DVSD).

Section Two will present a variety of frequency charts based on the Likert-scale survey completed by stakeholders within the DVSD. These data will be used to triangulate results of stakeholder perception in Chapter 5.

Section Three will present qualitative data from a total of five focus group interviews. The five focus group interviews included over 300-minutes of qualitative data. Creswell and Poth (2018) concluded that statistical means can often overlook the unique perceptions of individuals within a study group. Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) concluded that qualitative data are useful when additional investigations are needed to better understand the contexts of participants in a study. Inductive Content Analysis (ICA) was utilized to initially code all five of the focus group interview scripts. The inductive analysis strategy was used to allow the data to speak for itself. Nowell et al. (2017) state, “Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (p. 8). Once the inductive analysis process is complete, a deductive content analysis strategy was utilized to confirm and compare the emerging themes to the research questions. Creswell (2014) opined:

This inductive process illustrates working back and forth between the themes and database until the researchers have established a comprehensive set of themes. Then deductively, the researchers look back at their data from the themes to determine if more evidence can support each theme or whether they need to gather additional information. Thus, while the process begins inductively, deductive thinking also plays an important role as the analysis moves forward.” (p. 186)

The artifacts, quantitative data from the online survey and qualitative data from the focus group interviews were combined to create a triangulation of results. Triangulation of data is a process that is used to “enhance the validity of a study” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 194).

Emerging research themes can be confirmed by comparing the different data sets and artifacts.

The researcher adds validity to the study by establishing themes based on “converging several

sources of data or perspectives from participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). “The notion of triangulation, or the inclusion of multiple perspectives, guards against viewing events in a simplistic or self-serving way” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 68). In sum, triangulation of different data sources creates justification for themes.

To encourage participation in the online survey and focus group interviews, six Google gift cards totaling \$350.00 were used to facilitate stakeholder participation. Intentions were to limit focus group interviews to approximately one hour, although several of the interviews exceeded the allotment of time. Participants were invited to contact the researcher by email if they had any additional information to share. This information was pasted into the transcript of the focus group interview for the group in which the stakeholder participated. A note was added to indicate the date when this data were added.

A digital record of all communications was maintained to create an audit trail. Transcripts from focus group interviews, online survey results were stored under a password protected research folder saved to Google server. Documents and artifacts from previous school bond referendums were digitized and included in this password protected research folder.

The data collected for this mixed-methods study sought to answer three research questions:

1. What rationale(s) for rural school bond referendum impact passage?
2. What are the challenges of communicating the rationale for a school bond referendum?
3. What are local community perceptions regarding the tax increases to support building or updating facilities?

## COVID-19 Impact Research Statement

Plans for the collecting data for this study were interrupted by the March 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing restrictions implemented on research protocols by the University of Arkansas and the State of Kansas severely limited access to community stakeholders. This resulted in the following changes to previous research protocols:

1. The researcher was unable to conduct “in-person” recruitment of stakeholder participation for the quantitative survey. Plans were to set up a table at local school and community events so I could actively engage stakeholders on the importance of this research and answer questions in person. Only email and social media was utilized to recruit participation. This limited the ability to reach school district stakeholders who were not affiliated with the school district.
2. An amendment to my research protocol was submitted to the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB). This amendment requested permission to create a recruitment video to post on social media explaining the importance of this study. Additionally, \$350.00 in Amazon gift cards were offered as motivation. Although approved by the IRB, the results were minimal. The use of digital communication as the only form of stakeholder engagement was detrimental to the research process.
3. All five focus group interviews were conducted through the online platform Zoom Video Communications<sup>®</sup>. Although information acquired from the focus group interviews was helpful, it is the researcher’s opinion that hosting the interviews online created limitations to the availability of some stakeholders. Upon further consideration and acquiring assistance on the Zoom Video Communications<sup>®</sup> platform, one retired stakeholder agreed to participate. This stakeholder’s

contribution to the qualitative data was critical to the research process due to his lifetime experience of living within the DVSD.

## **Results and Findings**

### ***Section One - Document Analysis Review***

Since 1968, the DVSD (pseudonym) has presented three school bond referendums (i.e., 1998, 1999 and 2004) to district stakeholders requesting permission to build a new facility. The first two school bond referendums failed. The third, in 2004, voters approved a 9.9-million-dollar new middle school, which is the only successful school bond election for new facilities to gain stakeholder support since 1968.

The 1998 school bond proposal included a new middle school and additions to the elementary schools in Comiskey (pseudonym) and Shea (pseudonym). The 1999 proposal included a new high school and additions/updates to the elementary schools in Comiskey and Shea. The old high school, located in Comiskey, would then become the middle school. The 2004 proposal included a new middle school, new high school competition gymnasium and athletic locker rooms, updated and expanded district kitchen and additional classrooms to both the Comiskey and Shea Elementary buildings. All three school bond proposals included new or upgraded facilities for both Comiskey and Shea, yet the first two school bond elections were defeated.

Campaign folders from all three school bond elections were archived by the same school district board of education clerk. These folders included steering committee meeting agendas, board of education agendas and promotional flyers for each of the elections seeking support for a new facility (1998, 1999, and 2004). Each folder was maintained and stored at the Delaware Valley district office. The availability of these documents allowed the researcher to compare and

contrast the difference in campaign strategies and how they might correlate to the success or failure of each school bond election. Table 11 illustrated the breakdown of voting results for each election, as well as the board of education's vote on whether to approve asking stakeholders for approval of the proposed school bond.

**Table 11**

*Past 30-year School Bond Election history for the DVSD*

BoE Vote	Vote Results	Election Date	Result	Yes – No	Amount
Aug – 98	4-3 in favor	11-3-98	Failed	817-946	9.1 Million
Jan – 99	4-2 in favor	4-6-99	Failed	248-1,252	14.86 Million
11-20-03	Unanimous 5-0	11-2-04	Passed	1,751 – 983	9.9 Million

*Note:* School bond referendums proposed to DVSD stakeholders in the past 50 years.

**Unanimous Board of Education Support:** The 2004 school bond referendum that gained unanimous support from board of education members was supported by DVSD stakeholders. The 1999 school bond referendum failed miserably by a vote of 83.4% opposed to 16.6% in support. This school bond election was presented to DVSD voters five months after the previous school bond election that failed by a vote of 54% opposed to 46% in support. As indicated in Table 11, neither the 1998 or 1999 school bond referendum gained unanimous board of education support. Four years later, with unanimous board of education support, a school bond referendum to build a new facility passed with 64% in support and 36% opposed. Of significant note is the successful 2004 school bond referendum requested just short of one million dollars more than the unsuccessful 1998 school bond referendum. Almost as many stakeholders (1,751) voted in favor of the 2004 school bond referendum as compared to the total number of stakeholders (1,763) who cast a vote to support or oppose the 1998 school bond referendum. These findings support multiple researchers who concluded unanimous support by the local board of education for the bond proposal is critical in its successful passage (Dunbar, 1991; Weathersby, 2002; Holt, 2002; Mobley, 2007; Kraus, 2009; and Adams, 2017). Justification for

further investigation into the campaign folders in an effort to determine differences in promotional and stakeholder engagement strategies was warranted. The result of this investigation uncovered the following factors which influenced the success of the 2004 bond referendum as opposed to the failure of 1998 and 1999 school bond referendums.

**Cost to Taxpayer:** A mill levy chart was created for the 1999 and 2004 election. This chart was not created for the 1998 school bond election. Both the 1999 and 2004 charts provided tax increase information to district stakeholders. However, the 1999 mill levy campaign chart only included tax increases for homes valued at \$50,000, \$75,000, \$100,000, and \$150,000, yet did not address farmland. In 2004, the mill levy chart included homes valued at \$100,000, \$150,000 and \$250,000, but also included a chart on tax increases for pasture and tillable farmland. This additional information seemed to quiet the opposition's attempt to spread false information about the amount of increase taxes the bond election would cause. (Appendix C)

**Campaign Promotion Strategies:** Campaign flyers were created in all three bond referendum campaigns. However, there was a significant difference in their appearance. In 1998 and 1999, the flyers were created and printed in black and white on 8.5" X 11" paper. The flyers did not appear to be professionally created. The content of the flyers was very basic in nature including information on the need, how the proposed facilities would address the need and the increase cost amounts for home owners only. No other information was included. In 2004, the flyers were created by a professional graphic designer. The flyer was produced on 11" x 17" paper similar to a magazine cover in quality. The 2004 flyers included all information found in 1998 and 1999 (i.e., the need, how the proposed facilities address the need, and the cost). The flyer also included contact information of 40 campaign steering committee members and quotes

from six prominent school district stakeholders who support the proposal school bond referendum. A picture of each stakeholder was included beside the quote.

The campaign steering committee included 40 district stakeholders who were divided up into a leadership committee, a finance committee, yes-vote committee, speaker's bureau committee and publicity committee. This allowed school district stakeholders to identify specific community stakeholders who could answer specific questions related to the proposed bond. Lastly, local newspaper coverage was sought to engage and inform the public. Although newspaper coverage was also sought in the 1998 and 1999 election, the 2004 campaign members strategically ensured a quote and picture was include of a prominent, well-known district stakeholder who had previous been "*vocally*" opposed to the 1998 and 1999 school bond referendums. The newspaper article including a picture of the former opposition stakeholder presenting at a town hall meeting. The caption included a quote from the stakeholder which said, "The board has it right this time!"

**Slogans:** Campaign slogans were utilized in the 2004 school bond election. The 1998 flyer heading was "School Bond Issue—DVSD –Vote Nov, 3, 1998." The 1999 flyer heading included a black and white blurred picture of an old school house with the word "VOTE" underneath, and the day of the election. Both campaign flyers were very generic and printed in black and white. In 2004, the professionally created flyer included a slogan "Vote Yes, Kids First!" This slogan was also included on posters distributed around the school district and on stickers that district supporters wore on their chest. The chest sticker communicated the follow message. "Vote Yes! Ask me, about the DVSD school bond proposal." This strategy seemed to saturate social gatherings with supporters of the school bond referendum.



**Engagement:** Stakeholder engagement was minimal in the 1999 election. Surveys were sent to 2,400 residents to gather input before the January 1999 election. Only 397 responded or 16.5% of residents participated in the survey. In the 2004 election, stakeholder engagement was sought by town hall meetings, which were held in all four towns (Fenway, Comiskey, Shea and Wrigley). Food (hotdogs and popcorn) was used to entice residents to attend. As previously mentioned, other significant changes to the stakeholder engagement strategies utilized before the 2004 election included: an organized committee of 40 stakeholders, the professionally created campaign flyers, two different professionally produced stickers in support of the school bond referendum and door to door campaigning.

**Organized Opposition:** There was organized opposition to the school bond elections of 1998 and 1999. A typed letter explaining the opposition's rationale for not supporting the school bond proposal was circulated around the district in both elections. In 2004, no letter of opposition was discovered in archived documents. Perhaps the shirt stickers worn by numerous school district stakeholders saturated the district with supports of the school bond election and provided the opportunity for those originally opposed to find answers to questions. Regardless, the absence of organized opposition to the 2004 school bond referendum had an enormous impact on the outcome.

**Time Span from Board Approval to Election Date:** In 1998, the DVSD board of education approved the bond referendum in August of 1998. The election seeking approval from stakeholders was three months later in November of 1998. Similarly, in 1999, the DVSD board of education approved the bond referendum in January of 1999. The election occurred three months later in April of 1999. The school district attempted two bond referendums within five months. The 1998 bond election failed with 54% of DVSD stakeholders voting no and the 1999

bond election overwhelmingly failed with 83% of DVSD stakeholders voting no. Conversely, the 2004 bond election was approved by 64% of the DVSD stakeholders. A significant difference included unanimous board of education vote in support of the bond referendum. Additionally, once approved by the board of education to present the bond referendum to stakeholders, a full year (12 months) passed before the election occurred. This 12-month time span, supported by professionally-created campaign literature promoted by school district stakeholders undoubtedly had a positive impact on the bond election outcome. A significant difference in time passed between the date of school board approval to Election Day, which provided supporters plenty of time to promote the need and address rumors.

### ***Section Two - Stakeholder Survey Responses***

The survey created for this study allowed for data to be disaggregated by a variety of demographic groups including age, town of residence, employment status/job type, and whether the survey participant had children attending the DVSD or not. Qualtrics<sup>®</sup>, a data management software, was utilized to administer and analyze the survey. The demographic identification of survey participants allowed for purposeful sampling of focus group interview participants. Purposeful sampling seeks to identify specific participants who can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2017, p. 125)

School district stakeholders were given 16 weeks to complete the survey starting on July 5, 2020 and ending on October 25, 2020. This allotment of time for survey completion was due to low stakeholder participation numbers during the initial implementation of the survey. In an effort to increase participation, a recruitment video was created in early August of 2020 to explain the importance of the survey and encourage stakeholders to participate. The video was

posted on the school district social media page and stakeholders were encouraged to share. A \$100.00 Amazon gift card drawing was offered for all stakeholders who completed the survey and agreed to participate in a focus group interview. Survey completers were eligible for the \$100.00 gift card regardless of whether they were chosen as focus group interview participants. Additionally, one \$50.00 Amazon gift card drawing occurred for each focus group.

The impact of both the recruitment video and Amazon gift cards was minimal. Facebook data showed nearly 2,000 individuals were reached, yet less than 30 additional surveys were added. Stakeholder survey participation apathy could have numerous causes, which is a research topic itself. The survey for this study yielded a total of 326 participants who started the survey, but even less (277 participants) completed all questions. Although more stakeholder participation was preferred, only 726 residents cast votes in the last election involving a mill levy increase. That election took place in August of 2019 when voters opposed the establishment of a recreation commission by a two-thirds vote. Other factors may have been the threat of COVID-19 and the associated stress it created. As a result of the COVID19 pandemic, data has started to emerge that suggests Americans' are not only stressed but also angry. As stated by the American Psychological Association (2020):

Around 2 in 3 Americans (66%) say getting coronavirus is a significant source of stress in their life, which is significantly more than said the same in May-June (61%) Adults in the Midwest are most likely to say they feel frustrated as a result of the coronavirus pandemic (47% vs. 35% Northeast, 37% South, and 42% West), and are significantly more likely than adults in other regions to report feeling angry (27% vs. 15% South, 16% Northeast, and 18% West).

The onslaught of political advertisements associated with the heated political elections in November of 2020 and the never ending 2020 Census Bureau recruitment reminders may have been barriers in acquiring stakeholder participation on the survey. Competition for time and

commitment was obviously great. These emotions likely caused apathy on stakeholder participation on a survey which they possibly failed to see the value of completing.

Although total survey participation numbers were below expectations, the demographic breakdown was fairly encouraging (Table 12). A primary goal of the survey was to collect demographic information which would provide perceptual feedback from multiple groups such as age, employment or geographic location within the DVSD. Stratified purposeful sampling was then used to ensure that each member of the five focus groups represented a demographic group within the school district. Creswell (2018) asserts that stratification ensures that specific tax-paying members from the community are represented in the study, thus ensuring the data sample represents a range of individuals with specific characteristics. All five targeted demographic groups were identified in the four community focus groups. Those groups included: a resident with children attending school, a resident without children attending school, a small business owner located within the school district, an Agriculture/Rancher, and a retired resident.

**Table 12**

*Survey: Distribution of Demographic Information: Chosen Career*

Which job most closely matches your current employment?	<i>n</i>	%
Corporate (business world)	46	14.11
Industry (plant/machine operators, assemblers)	13	3.99
Management (business, hospitality)	24	7.36
A small business located within the Delaware Valley School District	15	4.60
A small business located outside the Delaware Valley School District	12	3.68
Sales	4	1.23
Service	26	7.98
Agriculture/Rancher	16	4.91
Medical	37	11.35
Education	83	25.46

**Table 12 Cont.***Survey: Distribution of Demographic Information: Chosen Career*

Which job most closely matches your current employment?		
Military	5	1.53
Retired	26	7.98
Currently Unemployed	19	5.83

*Notes.* N=325 One respondent skipped response.

Survey participation numbers by geographic location mirrored the percentage of actual populations of school district towns (Table 13 and Table 14). The community of Comiskey is the largest town in the DVSD and provided 50.61% of the survey responses. Shea is the second largest town in the school district and provided 29.14% of the survey responses. The third largest town is Fenway, which provided 10.74% of the survey participants. Although no census population is provided for the town of Wrigley, it did provide 9.51% of the survey participants.

**Table 13***Survey: Distribution of Demographic Information: Geographic Location/Township*

Which school district town is your residence most closely located?	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Fenway Township	35	10.74
Comiskey Township	165	50.61
Shea Township	95	29.14
Wrigley Township	31	9.51

*Note:* N=326

**Table 14***Township response percentage as compared to actual township population*

<i>Township</i>	<i>Survey Response %</i>	<i>Actual Population</i>	<i>%</i>
Fenway Township	10.74	201	10.58
Comiskey Township	50.61	949	49.97
Shea Township	29.14	749	39.44

Total Population 1,899

**Table 14 (Cont.)**

<i>Township</i>	<i>Survey Response %</i>	<i>Actual Population</i>	<i>%</i>
Wrigley Township	9.51	NA –Census	NA

*Note:* Percentage was established by dividing the township population by the sum of the three towns. Fenway, Comiskey and Shea. Wrigley was not included because the U.S. Census does not include a population count for the town of Wrigley.

Table 15 examines the distribution of stakeholder representation based on building of attendance. Those stakeholders with no children attending the DVSD were included in this table. The intent was to determine whether one building level had more survey participant representation than another. This table allowed disaggregation of stakeholders with children attending DVSD from those without children in this district. Stakeholders without children in this district had less survey representation than those stakeholders with children attending the DVSD. Comiskey Elementary, home to 11.56% of the total DVSD enrollment was represented by 13.28% of survey respondents. Shea Elementary, home to 25.83% of the DVSD enrollment was represented by 16.12% of the survey respondents. DVMS, home to 29.82% of the total DVSD enrollment was represented by 24.54% of survey respondents. DVHS, home to 32.77% of the total district enrollment was represented by 27.47% of respondents. Respondents who indicated they did not have children attending the DVSD were 18.46%.

**Table 15**

*Survey: Distribution of Demographic Information per Attendance Center*

Which buildings do your children attend?										
Building	Fenway		Shea		Comiskey		Wrigley		Total	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
DVHS	14	11.48	36	29.51	62	50.82	10	8.20	122	27.47
DVMS	11	10.09	35	32.11	55	50.46	8	7.34	109	24.54
Shea Elem	8	11.11	24	33.33	35	48.61	5	6.94	72	16.12
Comiskey Elem	7	11.86	15	25.42	32	54.24	5	8.47	59	13.28

**Table 15 (Cont.)**

Building	Fenway		Shay		Comiskey		Wrigley		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
No Children	6	7.32	21	25.61	41	50.00	14	17.07	82	18.46
	46		131		225		42		444	

*Note:* Percentage totals do not equal 100 because respondents may have children attending more than one attendance facility.

Survey respondents were diverse in age range (Table 16). Due to research restrictions associated with COVID19, a majority of the data was collected online. Online respondents include 14% who were 60 years or older. Approximately 57% of the respondents were age 30-49.

**Table 16**

*Survey: Distribution of Demographic Information: Participant Age*

What is your age range?	<i>n</i>	%
Age 18-29	35	10.71
Age 30-39	95	29.14
Age 40-49	93	28.53
Age 50-59	57	17.48
Age 60-69	27	8.28
Age 70-79	17	5.21
Age 80 or older	2	.61

*Note.* N=326

When disaggregating survey participants by the number of years living within the school district boundary, the distribution was again diverse (Table 17) such that no group was overwhelming represented. The least number of years to live within the school district boundary was 31 to 40 years at 13.80% of the respondents. The demographic group who has lived the longest within the DVSD was 10 years or less at 29.14% of the respondents. Stakeholders

indicating that they have lived within the school district boundary for 20 year or less included 51.84% of the respondents. This data point suggestion has several possible explanations including, but not limited to the following: 1) Growth is already occurring within the DVSD; 2) Long-time residents are not as engaged as the newer residents; and 3) due to COVID restrictions and limited online access for senior citizens or retired stakeholders, it was too great of a challenge to engage this demographic group.

**Table 17**

*Survey: Distribution of Demographic Information: Total years lived in DVSD*

How long have you lived in the DVSD?	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Lived in DVSD 0-10 years	95	29.14
Lived in DVSD 11-20 years	74	22.70
Lived in DVSD 21-30 years	56	17.18
Lived in DVSD 31-40 years	45	13.80
Lived in DVSD More than 40 years	56	17.18

*Note: N=326*

In addition to the demographic questions, 11 additional questions were included on the survey. These questions sought to learn about stakeholder perceptions regarding district facilities, the district's ability to communicate, build trust, and engaging stakeholders in the school planning process.

The survey questions in Table 18 address stakeholder perceptions on trust in school district leadership and its ability to communicate. Just over half of respondents (63.9%) strongly agree/agree the DVSD communicates current and future needs adequately to district stakeholders, while 20.94% of respondents remained neutral, and only 15.17% strongly disagree



or disagree. Of note is that no respondents indicated they strongly disagree the DVSD adequately communicates current and future needs.

Only 38.9% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that adequate information was provided before the 2019 recreation commission vote occurred, with even fewer respondents (31.77%) who strongly agreed or agreed there was adequate community feedback gathered about the need for a recreation commission. Interestingly, 45.12% of respondents strongly agree or agree the school district communicated an acceptable reason for why the recreation commission was needed. Over 70% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they trust school district officials to spend money appropriately and in the best interests of students. The question with the highest percentage of respondents to indicate strongly agree or agree was about stakeholder involvement with future planning in the DVSD. Respondents (77.61%) indicated community members need to be more involved with the planning process for future plans in the DVSD. Only 62.81% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were aware of the proposed housing developments near our local major university athletic complex and the impact those housing developments could have on school district enrollment.

**Table 18**  
*Frequency Table for Survey Question Responses*

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Survey Responses for stakeholder perceptions on trust and communication.

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Survey Questions	SA/A		N		D/SD	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Delaware Valley schools consistently communicates the current needs of the school district to all stakeholders	115	63.9	55	20.94	7	15.17
I trust the Delaware Valley school district to spend taxpayer money appropriately	198	71.74	54	19.57	24	8.69
I trust the decisions made by Delaware Valley school district officials do represent the best interests of our students and community	202	73.19	48	17.39	26	9.42

**Table 18 (Cont.)**

Survey Questions	SA/A		N		D/SD	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
I am aware of the proposed housing developments near our local major university athletic complex and the impact those housing developments could have on school district enrollment numbers	174	62.81	43	15.52	60	21.66
I feel adequate information was provided about the August 2019 recreation vote	108	38.99	76	27.44	93	33.57
I feel there was adequate community feedback gathered about the need for a recreation commission	85	31.77	102	36.82	87	31.41
I feel the school district communicated an acceptable reason for why the recreation commission was needed	125	45.12	81	29.24	71	25.63
In terms of future plans for the Delaware Valley school district, I feel community members need to be more involved with the planning process	215	77.61	55	19.86	7	2.53

*Note:* N=277. SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

Table 19 addresses stakeholder perception on the importance of school facilities. Stakeholders indicated that they overwhelmingly value modern facilities that can attract and retain quality teachers, with over 85% of the respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing of its importance. Just over half (55.95%) of the respondents indicated they believe current facilities are adequate.

**Table 19**

*Survey responses for stakeholder perceptions on facilities*

Survey Questions	SA/A		N		D/SD	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
The current facilities are adequate for the students of Delaware Valley schools.	155	55.95	62	22.38	60	21.66

**Table 19 (Cont.)**

Survey Questions	SA/A		N		D/SD	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
I believe that modern facilities are important and help create a learning environment that is essential for student learning.	240	86.65	29	10.47	8	2.89
I believe that modern facilities attract and retain quality teachers.	244	88.09	26	9.39	7	2.53

*Note:* N=277. SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

Three additional charts were created as a “snapshot comparison” of the differences among the three demographic groups and their perceptions on communication and the importance of school district facilities. The snapshots represent a microcosm view of the perceptions of each demographic group. The three groups were selected based on the qualitative data collected from three open-ended survey questions. Two groups (retired and agriculture/ranchers) were mentioned numerous times as important stakeholders whom the district must engage for support of a school bond referendum. The researcher wanted to compare responses from these two demographic groups to a third group (educators) who typically do support school bond proposal.

A lifelong Shay resident working in the corporate/business world expressed concern for the impact of taxes on the elderly by stating, “Impacts to our elderly population living on fixed incomes. Any corresponding tax increases and the associated timing. Prioritizing needs of the district.” In addition to the impact of new taxes on elderly, a 50–59-year-old from Shay resident (educator) recommended:

Get the older people in the communities behind it. For the most part, they are the ones who are against any increase in taxes, especially for services they don't think are necessary. Clearly describe the benefit to the community as a whole. Clearly describe how individual's contributions (taxes) help the morale of the community.

Stakeholders also expressed concern over the tax impact on landowners. A 50-59 Shay resident working in the Corporate/Business world shared that school district officials should monitor “Current tax burden on property owners in the district - property tax making it difficult for seniors living on fixed income to afford to stay in their homes is a real thing.” A 40-49 year old from Fenway shared:

There are people who own land in the district who do not live or have the right to vote in the district. (I.E. absentee land owners). This results in taxation without representation. This results in people who have no ability to vote, get no direct benefit from the mill levy issue, but are paying significant dollars in taxes to contribute to the project. For example, we have landowners that we farm for who own land in multiple Kansas counties and states who complain that their land in USD 343 district is the highest property tax that they have.

A 50-59 year old Wrigley resident in Agriculture/Ranching shared:

A lot of landowners who pay significant taxes may be older and not have students in school anymore. This is a group of people that need to have information given to them personally so they know the facts. They need convinced of why these additions/programs are needed for the schools.

Table 20 compares survey responses from these three demographic groups (educators, retirees and agriculture/rancher). Retirees and educator stakeholders provided similar responses for strongly agree or agree that the school district consistently communicates current needs to all stakeholders. Agriculture/ranchers were less confident in the school district’s ability to consistently communicate current needs to stakeholders.

**Table 20**

*Survey response for stakeholder perceptions on communication*

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Delaware Valley schools consistently communicates the current needs of the school district to all stakeholders.

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Demographic Group	SA/A		N		D/SD	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Educators	44	64.7	13	19.1	11	16.1
Agriculture/Rancher	4	36.3	4	36.3	3	27.3

**Table 20 (Cont.)**

Demographic Group	SA/A		N		D/SD	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Retired	15	60	5	20	4	16

*Note.* N=89

Table 21 identifies the differences between the three demographic groups towards current facilities being adequate for the students of the DVSD. A majority of the agriculture/ranchers (63.6%) and retirees (54.2%) strongly agree or agree that current facilities are adequate. Less than half of the educators (41.1%) strongly agree or agree that current facilities are adequate for the students of DVSD, although it should be noted that 27.3% of Farmers/Ranchers and 20.8% of retired stakeholders expressed neutrality. Perhaps retired stakeholders are simply not aware of current facility conditions (good or bad) because they have not been inside some of the facilities in years.

**Table 21**

*Survey responses for stakeholder perceptions on facilities*

Demographic Group	SA/A		N		D/SD	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Educators	28	41.1	17	25	23	33.8
Rancher/Farmers	7	63.6	3	27.3	1	9.0
Retired	13	54.2	5	20.8	6	25

*Note.* N=89

Table 22 is the last “snapshot” of demographic responses and involved how important modern facilities are in creating an environment that is essential for student learning. Educators overwhelmingly agreed of the importance of modern facilities (88.2%). Retirees felt even stronger about the importance of modern facilities (91.6%) as compared to agriculture/ranchers where a majority, but significantly fewer respondents (63.6%) felt modern facilities were important and essential in creating an effective learning environment.

**Table 22**

*Survey responses for stakeholder perceptions on facilities*

Demographic Group	SA/A		N		D/SD	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	Educators	60	88.2	6	8.8	2
Rancher/Farmers	7	63.6	2	18.2	2	18.2
Retired	22	91.6	2	8.3	0	0

*Note.* N=89

The survey concluded with three open ended questions which provided respondents with an opportunity to elaborate on their perceptions regarding school bond proposals in the DVSD.

The three questions and the collected qualitative data are included below.

### **Survey Question One Results.**

*Please share any concerns or issues you might have with past school bond elections in the Delaware Valley school district?*

Survey participants provided a variety of responses but the main themes that arose were communication and rationale/trust. While 32.7% of those who choose to respond to this question expressed no concerns or issues about past school bond elections, others shared specific concerns about communication to stakeholders who do not have children attending the DVSD and lack of communication expressing the rationale for the school bond referendum.

A 40-49 year old agriculture/rancher from Shay stated, “Communication to student parents was great but not sure about non-student parents.” A 50-59 year old Comiskey resident in the medical field concurred by stating, “Not enough education is provided to the community as a whole, focus is directed to parents and students.” A 50-59 year old Corporate/Business resident of Shay commented:

I think it is hard to find out about what is going on with the school district. We didn't know anything about the recreation commission vote until we received a very uninformative notice from the Douglas County election office. I went looking for information online and eventually found out about it. And then there were more opportunities to find out about it, but I don't feel that the opportunities were equally available to non-internet users, older residents, for instance.

A 40-49 resident of Wrigley and small business owner commented:

We've only been a member of this district for two school years. Unfortunately, only a couple emails were sent regarding the recreation bond. While email is an effective tool for many, it's not often paid attention to by all constituents. As usual in local issues, only a very small percentage of the population voted, and most of those were those opposed (which I believe to be the normal course of local politics in general). Written literature would have perhaps drawn more attention.

Even younger demographic age groups agreed. A 30–39-year-old Shay resident from the corporate/business world offered, “Communication is lacking across all schools and the district as a whole.” The need for better communication was certainly a common stakeholder theme, but providing a rationale for any proposed school bond referendums, as well as hints of concern over the lack of transparency were also expressed. A 40-49 year old Comiskey resident employed in the corporate/business world shared, “I do think we need stronger communication and justification when these requests are put forth.” A 60-69 year old retired resident from Comiskey shared, “The school district only communicates needs when they need money.” A 50-59 year old agriculture/rancher from Wrigley stated, “I feel that there is not info shared, and what is shared is manipulated for what the school wants.” Finally, a 50-59 year old small business owner and resident of Fenway commented, “The purchase of the land south of the high school was slipped in the bond for the new middle school without disclosure.”

### **Survey Question Two Results.**

*Please identify three factors or consideration that you feel the Delaware Valley school district should consider before proceeding with any type of mill increase for taxpayers?*

Respondents provided a variety of responses but the main reoccurring theme included transparency about the need and communication of the actual cost or the amount of tax increase. A 50-59 year old small business owner from Fenway recommended, "Taxpayer input with FULL disclosures, audit of current budget, local consultants on needs and costs." A 30-39 Shay Resident concurred with the Fenway resident suggesting the district, "Make sure to give enough information about why our district needs whatever it is that will raise our taxes. The more we educate the community, I think the more they will accept it." A recommendation by a 50-59 year old educator from Comiskey included, "All inclusive, over communicate, transparent."

Articulating the rationale for the school bond referendum is vital. According to a 40-49 Wrigley resident and small business owner suggested:

A strong case should always be made when asking taxpayers to pay more. Communication of the reasons should be above board and open to anyone in the community and would be best as a school/city council alliance rather than school only and in-house spending should always be transparent and clear of obvious waste before asking for more from the taxpayers.

A 50-59 year old Shay resident shared:

Get the older people in the communities behind it. For the most part, they are the ones who are against any increase in taxes, especially for services they don't think are necessary. Clearly describe the benefit to the community as a whole. Clearly describe how individual's contributions (taxes) help the morale of the community.

Survey participants also mentioned concern over the amount of tax increases associated with school bond referendums. Stakeholders believe if the district's goal is to gain support to approve a school bond referendum, a variety of factors must first be addressed such as tax increases, paying off previous school bonds, and the impact on senior citizens. A 40-49 year old resident of Shay (corporate/business world) recommended that school district officials clearly articulate "Impacts to our elderly population living on fixed incomes. Any corresponding tax increases and the associated timing. Prioritizing needs of the district." A 60-69 year old resident of Shay



recommended consideration of “The income of the majority of the patrons. Having a set plan for the use of the increased mill increase. Getting input from all patrons.” According to a 30-39 year old small business owner from Shay, the school district must also consider the property tax rate differences between school district towns and counties. This same stakeholder from Shay also opined:

Current taxation rates differ between the different counties that make up the district. County valuations of property differ greatly between the counties that make up the school district. The population of the cities in the higher taxed areas may already be paying more than their fair share.

Paying off previous bonds before asking for approval of another bond referendum was considered important to a 40-49 year old Shay resident (Agriculture/Ranchers/Educator). This stakeholder shared:

New bond issues should be steered away from, if possible, until older bonds are paid off. Mill levy increases are presented as \$X/household increase, but for a land owner or business owner, the costs are significantly higher resulting in a much higher disproportionate payment of taxes paid.

Stakeholder survey responses to question two clearly demonstrated the need for total financial transparency with clear, concise and succinct communication.

### **Survey Question Three Results.**

*Do you have any suggestions on how the school district should communicate the need or rationale for mill levy increases?*

Stakeholder responses included a variety of suggestions including transparency about the rationale and cost as well as suggested communication strategies, such as door to door campaigning and hosting of town hall meetings or community informational forums. The overwhelming popular response for question three was to provide communication through print, not solely utilize digital platforms such as email or social media. For example, a 40-49

unemployed resident of Fenway emphasized, “In writing to all who will be affected (snail mail).” A 70-79 year old retiree from Comiskey recommended the school district provide, “Newsletter ongoing, and town hall meetings to address the positive and negative comments received. Aggressively pursue the positive and find solutions.” Another respondent, a 50-59 year old Wrigley small business owner recommended, “Mailed letters to taxpayers in our school district. Facebook, social media do not cut it with the Senior Citizen home owners in this area.” Similarly, a 40-49 year old small business owner from Wrigley stated, “Strong cases in written form combined with social media and community meetings. Can link up with the two City Councils in our district to try to get buy in and support from them.” Two 30-39 year olds of Wrigley and Shaw, respectfully, recommended, “Email, regular mail in mailbox” and “Newsletter, memos sent home.” A 50-59 year old Comiskey resident who listed education as their profession concurred with the Shaw resident that newsletters were important but added, “Community meetings, newsletters, videos of patron responses positive and negative.” Stakeholder responses continued to overwhelming support hard material literature, such as a 50–59-year-old Corporate/Business resident of Shay recommending use of a variety of communication platforms stating, “Newspaper, newsletter, direct mailing, online platforms, in person meetings, community groups - you've got to try it all.” Finally, a 40-49 year old Shaw resident emphasized, “Printed flyer with simple and clear bullet points listing balanced pros and cons, detailed description of how current funds are already used.”

Survey results indicate the age of DVSD stakeholders does not impact the desire for town hall/open forum meetings. While “Letters to district residents, newspaper articles, public meetings, discussion panels” was recommended by a 70-79 resident of Comiskey (military), an 18-29 year old Comiskey resident, (medical) concurred when sharing, “Have a meeting with the

community, so they can ask questions. Don't just expect people to go to a school board meeting." A 50-59 year old Wrigley resident (Agriculture/Rancher/Educator) recommended, "Focus groups made up of a variety of community members are needed and then those people need to go out and talk to other community people at forums, community events, etc. or in person (door to door) to get support." Stakeholders support purposeful engagement strategies that take the information to the community rather than providing a media platform and expecting stakeholders to seek the information. Other comments that supported this theme include:

- 50-59 year old Shay resident:

I'm not sure people always take the time to read lengthy emails although I think they are necessary. Perhaps information could be briefly shared at meetings where you already have high parent involvement, like a parent sports meetings, enrollment meetings, sporting events. Maybe quick automated phone calls would work. It is probably good to have a variety of ways you are communicating to the patrons of the district. Visual graphs and word pictures are always helpful.

- A 30-39 year Shay resident (education) shared,

I received most of my information from people in the community, not the school and wasn't sure if all of it was accurate information. Please send emails to everybody possible and news letters to the community explaining all benefits and list somewhere people can ask questions and receive timely answers.

- A 40-49 year old Shay resident in the corporate/business world recommended:

In-person meetings, social media, email, website information, newspapers, local business support (good schools help our local businesses to bring in more revenue), lots of good data and strong spokespeople who may not even be associated with the schools. Door to door campaigns. Grassroots. Student involvement would help as well.

Bottom line, DVSD stakeholders want thorough, detailed information about the bond referendum purpose and cost to taxpayers. They want information purposely delivered to them through postal mail or newspaper. Total transparency is key with plenty of detail provided about cost to all stakeholders including landowners and home owners.

### ***Section 3 - Focus Group Interviews***

Each school district town (Fenway, Comiskey, Shea, and Wrigley) was represented by a focus group. The demographic information from the online survey was used to select participants for four focus groups. Participating members were selected by stratified purposeful sampling. The stratified purposeful sampling ensured diverse representation in terms of employment, age or level of involvement with the DVSD. The predetermined demographic criteria included: 1) Stakeholder with children attending the DVSD 2) Stakeholder who does not have a child attending the DVSD 3) Small business owner 4) Retiree 5) Agriculture/Rancher. Members of the district site council were also invited to participate in a fifth focus group interview. Selected focus group participants represented the microcosmic perceptions of the stakeholder demographic groups they represented. Each participant was selected based on job description or whether or not they had a child attending the DVSD.

Once identified as a potential participant, individuals were invited to participate in the focus group interviews via email. The consent form (Appendix E) was attached and once returned, the individual was confirmed as a focus group interview participant. Due to University of Arkansas' COVID19 research protocol restrictions, all focus group interviews were completed via the Zoom Video Communications<sup>®</sup> platform and were completed during October and November of 2020. While the Zoom Video Communications<sup>®</sup> platform was not ideal, especially considering previous survey responses from participants indicating the desire for tangible, paper copies of communication, stakeholders appeared to participate freely and honestly while providing feedback to questions.

**Table 23**

*Summary of Focus Group Participants by demographic employment*

Interview Participants	Demographic
A1 - A4	Focus group stakeholders - with children attending DVSD
B1 – B4	Focus group stakeholders - without children attending DVSC
C1 – C4	Focus group stakeholders - Small Business
D1 – D4	Focus group stakeholders - Retired
E1 – E4	Focus group stakeholders - Agriculture/Rancher
F1 – F6	Focus group stakeholders who serve on District Site Council

*Note:* Two retirees participated on the Shay Focus Group Interview. This occurred because one retiree first declined the invitation to participate but later agreed after seeking help with the Zoom platform. The two retirees from Shay were assigned D4 and D4a.

Focus group interview questions (Appendix F) were created to elicit the collective perceptions of all stakeholders. Inductive open coding was initially completed while reviewing the focus group interview transcripts. Deductive focused coding was then completed to create a more concentrated subset of emerging themes. The primary emerging theme was the importance of consistent communication in multiple formats to all stakeholders. The ability of the school district to transparently share the needs of the school district consistently impacts the success of a school bond election.

### **Communication with Stakeholders in a Non-Digital Format.**

An emerging theme in the survey was the need for consistent communication through non-digital platforms that reach all stakeholders, especially stakeholders without children attending the DVSD and senior citizens. Stakeholders did not question the importance of digital communication, such as email or social media, but expressed support for hard copy communication methods. F1 opined:

I think the DVSD does a great job of communicating to those that have access to the

district, whether it's the emails and the recent COVID videos, things like that. But I think reaching community members that maybe are removed from the district, there seems to be a little bit of a gap there.

B1 shared, “As having the youngest child graduate last year, I went from being bombarded with communication to nothing now, so I really feel that all of a sudden, I’m not getting a whole lot of communication.” Furthermore, E4 shared “As your kids transition out of school and you don’t have kids in school, then some of these mailers or newsletters or things like that probably take on a higher level of importance.” Also, D3 commented, “Because I feel like I know less of what's going on than I used to and now being out of the school district, I feel a disconnect too.” While stakeholders with no children attending the school district shared their difficulty in knowing what is going on within the DVSD, stakeholders with children who do attend the DVSD recognized that without their school age children, they most likely would not be aware of school district events. E3 commented, “We've got kids in school, we get great references, communication through email, text or whatever, from their teachers, coaches, administrators. Real good! If we didn't have kids in there, right, we'd kind of be in the dark.” D1, also a parent with children attending the DVSD shared:

I was gonna say pretty much the whole six years we’ve lived here, they stay in touch with those of us who have kids, but I know I’ve had neighbors that have asked “What’s going on at the school”, and I’m like Well we have a ball game, we have this, what have that. But we use to mail out the calendar and they don’t do that anymore. There’s a lot of things that have changed and a lot of people got dropped. You’re just out of the loop and you don’t belong anymore. It’s like, you’re not important.

C1 emphasized, “the need to release the calendars and newsletter to the aging community because reaching out to these individuals is your tax base.” Additionally, D4 shared:

They (DVSD) should re-implement the letters monthly or whatever to the tax payers. Everybody doesn't have a computer, everybody doesn't get online, and I think when it comes to an election, it's the older people who very faithfully vote, and if they don't feel like they're a part of something like the school district, they may not vote favorably. But I

think most of the older people are very favorable for education. They just like to be included.

D4 echoed the need for hardcopy newsletters and information sent from the school district. “I think my age group for me, I need something that I can pick up, I can read, I can look at, and understand what those needs are.” B4 mirrored this thought by stating, “not everybody has access to the internet, living in a rural community, we don’t have the fiber optic internet. Out where I’m at, you have to do satellite, which can get a little pricey.” E4 shared the impact that COVID restrictions are having on digital communication and how easy it is to miss a digital communication from the school district.

With COVID, I work remotely when I’m not on the ranch, and so there’s a lot of days I have four Zooms, and you sort through 35 to 40 emails, so it’s a really tough thing because you can get it out to people very cheaply electronically, but it’s also the easiest to ignore.

B3 emphasized the importance of not assuming email is a sufficient method to communicate stating, “If it's not really about me, I get a million emails for work every day, I'm probably gonna delete it, but if someone took the time to put it in my mailbox and it affects people in my town, I think I would be more able to read that and understand it.

D3 shared:

Seems like you physically have to have a piece of paper. I find myself skimming emails, and then I'll say, Oh, I'll go back to that later, and I don't always, but sometimes a piece of paper that I read through and have a minute to look at or look at it again when I get ready to pick it up off the counter or something. I'll see it again, just kind of jogs your memory about it or just is a little more permanent for me anyway.

E1 stated “The strongest thing in all of this is lacking in communication. It should be regular communication if nothing else, weekly, that somethings sent out, that somebody stays abreast of it.”

The need for a more concerted effort to communicate to individuals not associated with the school district was evident by statements from stakeholders with no children attending

DVSD. B3 stated:

I would say, as an outside, kind of outside person and a person without kids, I get most of my communication and information about what's going on through the County Police Scanner. A lot of people tend to post school related stuff and fundraising this and that. Other than that, I don't get a lot of mailings or, physical mailings that is, and no email list serves or anything like that. Definitely, I would say, I'm pretty in the dark.

B3 continued, "I think the only way to reach that entire audience, especially people who don't have kids who aren't getting those communications, would be through targeted address-based marketing messages that are coming to your mailbox."

Concerns over the district's ability to communicate future school district needs were expressed by F3:

I think I've heard some things through site council maybe just about building conditions or things like that, but never really like, "This is our five-year plan. This is what we're working towards." I think I hear things like, "We need more housing," or things like that, but not that really relate to the school in particular.

F6 stated:

If you're not in the district, you don't really know. My siblings and I are out of school, my parents who lived in the district had no idea what that was about. So I think reaching out to those that aren't directly involved anymore would be very beneficial.

Concerning the 2018 Recreation Commission campaign, E1 stated "I got nothing, period. There was nothing mailed to me. I wish somebody had mailed me something that told me specifically how the money was gonna be spent." E1 later mentioned:

You can't just throw out a school bond or something at the last minute and expect it...you've gotta be talking about what the kids are needing and here's what we're thinking about, and what do you think? You've got to make people feel like they're a part of that, and they're vested, they're a shareholder, part of the business that we put together and everybody gets on the same page.

Both Holt (1993) and Florence (2014) found that communication must be transparent and



it is critical to school bond referendum success. Due to the autonomous nature of individual school districts, leaders must determine preferred methods of communication for all stakeholders. Qualitative data findings from this study support Holt (1993) and Florence (2014).

### **False Perceptions.**

During focus group interviews, stakeholders shared a concern with the district's ability to effectively communicate with stakeholders who do not have children attending the DVSD. This concern was expressed by focus group members due to the amount of misinformation that flooded social media platforms during the last proposed mill levee increase for the recreation commission in August of 2019. Although much of the information shared by uninformed district stakeholders on social media platforms was not factual, those perceptions were reality in the eyes of the stakeholder who was also uninformed. Focus group participants clearly communicated their belief that the DVSD cannot expect to pass a school bond referendum if the stakeholders don't understand the need or only receive communication about district needs during school bond referendum proposals. Effective communication is a must.

C1 shared the need for school district officials to set up and share a budget on what the tax burden will be for all stakeholders. C1 also emphasized the need for full disclosure due to the perception that undisclosed expenditures were added to the 2004 successful school bond election, (i.e., purchase of land south of the high school). C1 stated, "Why was this not disclosed to everybody?" Unfortunately, documents proving the falsity of the statements were not communicated in a manner that inoculated stakeholders from the impact of misinformation. Contrary to this stakeholder's perception, the land south of the high school was not part of the 2004 school bond election. This land was actually purchased in January of 1999 with capital outlay funds. School districts cannot include purchases into a school bond election without

specifically noting it in the proposed plans. Neuenswander (2021) of the Kansas Department of Education stated:

A district can only spend bond proceeds on the items that were listed on the bond election ballot. Frequently that language will list something like “and other improvements necessary for the project” so the district has some flexibility for unexpected expenditures. Buying land for an unknown project would typically not fit that category. It would have to be specifically spelled out in the language.

Additional statements, which indicate a need to more effectively communicate with district stakeholders who have no student connection with the school district include B4. Due to the difficulty of the DVSD to reach stakeholders who are no longer affiliated with the school district due to not having children in school, misinformation continued to emerge in this study. B4 expressed concern over the aging elementary school buildings. “Both those elementary buildings are aging. Their infrastructure inside, as far as the boiler system and different things, they’re way past their livability.” Contrary to this stakeholders concerns, the boiler systems in both elementary buildings were replaced during the summer of 2019. Additionally, by the end of May of 2021, both elementary buildings will have new roofs. Shay Elementary received a new roof in 2019 and Comiskey Elementary during the 2020-2021 school year. It should be noted this misinformation is not the fault of this stakeholder, but due to the failure of the DVSD to communicate updated information to all stakeholders.

Additional concerns were expressed about the heating and cooling system in other district buildings. For instance, A4 mentioned “At the high school where you've got one room and the child is sitting there and it's 90 degrees outside, but they're freezing to death because the AC, the HVAC system isn't up to date and working right.” Contrary to perceptions, updates to the DVHS heating/cooling system were completed during the summer of 2020, although the new systems at both elementary schools did experience issues during the sub-zero weather in February of 2021.

Those issues were addressed by district officials with support from the company who installed them. Regardless, this alludes to a lack of effective communication regarding facility upgrades happening in the DVSD. The word “effectively” is used because the DVSD is attempting to communicate relevant information but not in the format that is reaching all stakeholders, especially those not connected to the school district, as indicated by this qualitative research.

Dealing with false rumors perpetuated by the opposition to the August of 2019 recreation commission mill levy election was a difficult task. Some school district stakeholders indicated they changed their mind on voting in support of the recreation commission due to the rumors circulated by those opposed to the recreation commission. F6 shared:

I know a couple of people that were a yes until the rumor got around that they had hired somebody already to make \$30,000 and then probably five people, surprisingly, younger people, people in their 30s heard that and there was no changing their minds that they were adamantly against it, 'cause they just kind of felt like it was being done kind of under the table.

C3 was originally supportive of the recreation commission but shared, “Nobody that I knew of knew anything about it, except for that I had told a few people about it”. Eventually, C3’s mind was changed from a Yes vote to a No vote after a well-known community spokesperson and supporter of the recreation commission stated that voters will pass it because nobody knows about it. C3 felt the proponents of the recreation commission had only promoted it to stakeholders that would support it. Upon hearing this statement, C3 shared, “That’s not how you pass something, and I’m gonna do everything I can to make sure it doesn’t pass.” Multiple stakeholder suggested this well-known community spokesperson and supporter of the recreation commission was actually attempting to set himself up for a retirement job. In actuality, the school district had not hired anyone for the recreation director position. The DVSD attempted to communicate and advertise the purpose and rationale of the recreation commission through town

hall meetings and social media platforms, including the district webpage, but the school district did not communicate the rationale via hard copy documents/mailers, as recommended by stakeholders in this study.

Another perception that could impact stakeholders' trust with the district was shared by E3. E3 stated:

To me, I think they pretty much gave up on the Perry Grade School, at one time, I thought it was because of a roof issue. Now, the school district is bringing some money in through the daycare part of it, they will pay for some of that stuff.

The truth is the DVSD opened the daycare to meet a need of school district stakeholders. A 2016 needs assessment revealed the need for daycares in the district. In addition to this concern, one of five state of Kansas Board of Education outcomes is Kindergarten Readiness. The daycare was opened with the intent of meeting a community need and state accreditation need. It is a self-sustaining program, supported by fees charged. Contrary to this stakeholder's belief, it does not bring in a profit for the school district.

These perceptions were shared not to point out that stakeholders were wrong, but rather to demonstrate the DVSD is not effectively communicating to all stakeholders, especially those who no longer have children attending DVSD. The researcher did not correct any participant who made an inaccurate statement because the intended purpose was to determine how stakeholder perceptions influence the success of a school bond referendum, not to redirect participants' misinformation. It should be noted that these perceptions, when shared with other district stakeholders, perpetuate mistrust and frustrated district stakeholders. An example occurred during one focus group interview after B4 shared her concerns about the boilers in the elementary school. D4 later shared his "total unawareness that there were any problems with Shay Elementary School". One survey participant noted, "It is essential to address the negative

feedback prior to acting on the mill increase. Placing the mill levy issue on the ballot knowing there are negative concerns that have not been addressed will contribute to its failure.” It is critical that misinformation is addressed during the school bond campaign, before stakeholders go to the polls.

### **Rationale and Community Stakeholders.**

Holt (1993), Weathersby (2002), Theobald and Meier (2002), and Benzaquen (2016) believe that voters will ultimately support school bond proposals if they understand the rationale. Subsequently, Benzaquen (2016) found personal communication that successfully framed the need for the school bond referendum influenced the successful passage of a school bond. Stakeholders in the DVSD also supported these research findings.

E3 commented “Nobody's against spending money for education if the need is there”. The consensus was if you give stakeholders a valid need that supports student learning, they will support a school bond referendum.

B4 also recommended explaining the difference between different school funds and how those funds can be spent due to misconceptions associated with how schools spend money:

Everybody that works with school funding understands the different funds pay for different things, but the general public doesn't necessarily understand that. They're gonna look at your budget and go, "Well, you've got a \$7 million budget, why are you asking us to pass a bond for \$6 million? You've got the money there." I think there needs to be a little bit better explanation there of what each fund could actually really pay for, like capital outlay can only pay for certain things, general fund for certain things. Explain what you've got... You may have a general fund that's got a million dollars in it, but you can't necessarily use that whole million dollars because that's not what you budgeted for for that year. And I think that would go a long way with people as far as those that don't understand fund accounting versus general accounting and how things work.

Although the need or rationale for the school bond referendum was undoubtedly important with the previously mentioned stakeholders, of more significance in this collected data

is the inclusion of non-school district employees or community stakeholder's when determining and promoting the need. Do not depend solely on school district employees to plan and promote.

C1 stated, "You have to have a committee that deals with your tax base people, your older people like us, 'What would you like to see?' More community involvement, I mean, man that's gone, there's just none anymore, there's no community involvement." E4 suggested "A good way to gauge some of your stakeholders might be by doing something similar to what we're doing tonight" (i.e., Focus Group Interview). Stakeholders believe it is not the superintendent's job to lead a school bond campaign. B2 stated, "You need to have somebody in every community that's not just on the board, I think. It needs to be a coalition of people that are respected, can stand up and speak, can go out and persuade."

Not only did focus group interview participants emphasize community involvement in the planning process, but also suggested an organized strategy and slogan to help promote the school bond referendum. First and foremost, presenting the rationale for the school bond referendum to people "in person" was important to stakeholders, such as D2 saying:

When we did the middle school, I was involved with the speaker's bureau, and I can't remember, I think we made presentations to maybe as many as 40 different groups, and I think that was real effective. Going out to people where they are and presenting accurate information as to what's being proposed and answering questions accurately.

E4 opined, "folks willing to knock on doors makes a lot of difference." This face-to-face engagement was viewed as a critical component of the successful 2004 bond referendum and was supported by D3 who shared, "And what we tried to do is get out and talk to people, like we had people from each area and to really let people know why we need these things." F4 concurred:

For small community meetings, so that people can hear what the district has to say of what they think needs to happen, and then also have the feedback from the community of why they think that either works or doesn't work. And then there were also small groups

that went out or couples that went out and then talked one-on-one with various constituents. I know our neighbors came over and talked with us about it, for example. But I think that was actually a key piece, I know that takes a lot more work and a lot more continuity with the community and everything, but I think it was something that we understood more after hearing what exactly the school really needed and helped us to make our decision in that.

F1 supported F4s statement and said:

I was new to the DVSD at that time, and I remember there was people that came door-to-door to talk about it and answer any questions, that's what stands out in my mind during that, for the middle school bond.

Participation from a variety of district stakeholders was viewed as important for all focus group interview participants. C4 suggested,

If you made a video or YouTube video or something and had a retiree speak on why they think this should pass, have the parents of a child in school talking about why they think this should pass, have teachers, have administrators, have the kids tell you why.

Engagement of grandparents or retirees was believed to be critical in gaining support for a bond referendum. B4 stated "They're the ones that get out and vote. They're the ones that are paying the taxes. They're the ones you need to bring in and really let them be a big major part of the decision making.

The process of engaging all stakeholders was also viewed as important. Communicating through only a digital platform was viewed as detrimental to engaging all stakeholders. When stakeholders receive multiple daily emails from the school district along with their regular work and personal communication, the likelihood increases that digital messages from the school will remain unopened. C3 illustrated this concern with the following response:

I guess the way I find out about stuff that's going on with the school district is usually from talking to someone. Where they'll say, are you going to homecoming parade tonight? I had no idea that was tonight, but I guess I might go to it", type of thing. That's just kind of the way I am. I get 50 email today and if several of them are from the school district, from different people and I look at the subject line. If it looks important, I read it. If it's not, I don't have time.

### **Consolidation Animosity/Quid Pro Quo.**

The result of school district consolidation is still relevant today. Numerous comments were shared that indicate friction between the communities still exists, including the desire to protect the facilities within those communities. When questioned about whether or not animosity or conflict still existed between communities as a result of late 1960's consolidation, F2, a small business owner shared:

At the restaurant, we do hear people talk at dinner and stuff, and there has been lots of conversation in the past about, "Oh I remember when Perry had this," and it's an older generation, and I don't want to put an age on it because it's not nice, but they just...the ones that vote will keep the difference between the two. We're Shay, you're Comiskey.

D2 opined:

I think you would be hard-pressed, honestly, you would be hard-pressed to find any school district in the state of Kansas that involves similar-sized communities where there is not animosity based on the consolidation. I know a number of them. Now when you put a large number of people in west rural Farmdale that don't belong to any of the four communities (Fenway, Comiskey, Shay, and Wrigley). Now how does that impact it?

A2 reacted to D2's comment stating, "You in essence have five communities."

The pride associated with having a quality school building within the city limits was evident. E3 shared:

You still have your hometown pride deal and that's a lot of the bondage where school is, what am I gonna get out of this deal? You feel like your town's lost something there. Like even though we're all one big group, it shouldn't be that way.

E3 later added "I think a lot of it is generational. Darn, I went to that school, I can't believe they're closing it like that." D3 stated,

The older people are still bitter about losing their towns, and it's hard because there's a lot of times I have to convince my mom that, well, it's okay, that everybody's going to school together and people are getting along okay. But they still see that they've lost their community school.



F6 commented, “When the new middle school was built, but I know that that was a huge... There was a lot of people from Fenway area that were not happy that that building was closing, and so tensions kinda run high with maybe the board.”

As conversation continued about issues related to consolidation and building closures, a secondary theme began to emerge with younger stakeholder participants—a generational gap! One particular participant, A3, a stakeholder with children attending Delaware Valley Schools, grew up in the district but only attended the elementary school in Wrigley for one year before it was closed, stated “As kids, we were all just excited that we actually got to be together. It’s interesting to me to hear the different generations and how they feel about it as opposed to the other generations.” In response to conflict between the district communities as a result of consolidation, F6 shared, “I’m probably the youngest or close to probably the youngest that will be in any of your groups, and I don’t feel that...sorry!” E2 was also a younger stakeholder with children in the DVSD and was a student at Wrigley when it was closed. E2 shared:

I'd say there's some sour grapes about the last bond issue. I know... I was, I think, in sixth grade when it passed or something, and I was the last class in Wrigley Elementary. And I just know my family, and they all went to elementary school in the town of Wrigley. To them it felt like wasted money, and also we got rid of a perfectly fine school in the town of Wrigley.

One focus group conversation even alluded to DVSD crowd groupings at state athletic competitions indicating DVSD fans would sit in pockets inside the arena. D2 shared, “You see a pocket of Comiskey people over here, and there'd be a pocket of Shay people over there.”

Additional open-ended survey question responses include:

- Is the planned use of the money going to benefit ALL students?
- The benefits to the community as a whole and not just parent/students.

- All towns and especially all grades need to “get something” in order for bond votes to pass.
- Need to have facility upgrades/additions on both sides of the Kaw River and every grade level building has something that will garner support.

Overall, stakeholders recognize the presence of hard feelings over consolidation as it pertains to decisions to improve or build new facilities. Although not unusual, it is worth consideration when moving forward with a future school referendum proposal. Assuming stakeholders from all areas of the school district have successfully dealt with the emotions associated with losing a school building in the community or a high school for the 1960s is not recommended. Careful consideration should be given on the impact consolidation issues could make on a successful school bond referendum.

### **Chapter Summary**

Stakeholders freely shared ideas and thoughts on factors that influence the success of a school bond referendum in this rural Kansas school district. Although a variety of recommendations were shared, this should not serve as an indication that stakeholders are unhappy with the DVSD. Survey and focus group questions were posed in a way that sought information on factors that stakeholders believed would influence a school bond referendum. Stakeholders were also very complimentary and expressed pride in the DVSD. All were thankful to have sent or currently sending their children to DVSD, especially during the challenges of instruction during a national pandemic. A summation of this can be seen in two responses, C3 and E3, respectfully:

Right now, I believe that the Farmdale School District is making us look really good and that goes to the school board and the people that have been making the decisions. They've been making the right ones and it shows when you compare us to Farmdale and they look like a circus over there. And I think we've gotten a lot of bad press comparing us to

Farmdale over the years and I think that is because the Farmdale School District wants to get those students that are living in Farmdale, but they're in the DVSD. And, this year they can't wait to get into Delaware Valley.

I think through these uncharted waters here. We could tell after last spring that doing school online, virtual at home is not sustainable. So I'm glad to see them doing all they can to keep kids in school. That's where they're going to learn the most. And I think they've done a great job as far as the teachers and everybody working together to making that happen. A lot of stakeholders don't see that. If you don't have kids in there you're not seeing all that. You're not seeing how everything is going on behind the scene.

Regardless of the academic or athletic reputation of the school district, this study illustrated the importance of authentic and aggressive stakeholder engagement, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

**Table 24**  
Summary Table of Themes

	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Artifacts/Documents	Unanimous BoE support of School Bond Referendum	The school bond referendums of 1998 and 1999 did not have unanimous BoE support and both failed. The school bond referendum of 2004 did have unanimous BoE support and passed.
	Transparent communication Promotional Strategies	Professional created campaign flyers in 2004, as opposed to black/white copy machine flyers in 1998 and 1999. Communication of school bond impact on all taxpayers including owners of farm land. Promotional slogan used in 2004 with buttons/stickers for supporters to wear in support of school bond referendum. No such promotional strategies used in 1998 and 1999.
Online Survey Themes	Insufficient feedback sought for most recent mill levy increase associated with recreation commission.	A majority of survey respondents (68.23%) were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed the school district sought adequate feedback before presenting the recreation commission for vote. Additionally, (54.87%) of respondents were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed the district communicated the rationale for the recreation commission. Lastly, (77.61%) of survey respondents believe stakeholders need to be more involved in future bond referendums.
	Effective Communication	Only 63.9% of survey respondents indicated the DVSD consistently communicates current needs.

Table 24 (Cont.)

	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Focus Group Themes	Non-Digital communication with stakeholders	Focus group stakeholders were overwhelming supportive of hard copy newsletters when communicating school district needs.
	False Perceptions	Focus group participants expressed the need for more effective communication when responding to stakeholders voicing concerns about needs or issues that were not factual.
	Rationale and Community Stakeholders	Focus group participants overwhelming voiced the need for more effective communication of the rationale or need for any future school bond referendum.
	Consolidation Animosity Quid Pro Quo	Some animosity resulting from the late 1960s consolidation of the Shay and Comiskey school districts remain. Pride and protection of school building location is still relevant as stakeholders seek improvements to hometown buildings or desire to protect the hometown location of school buildings.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications**

### **Introduction and Study Overview**

The purpose of this study was to examine factors influencing stakeholder support of a school bond referendum in a rural Kansas school district. Due to a lack of information about actual stakeholder perceptions on support of school bond referendums, this research has focused on stakeholder perceptions in a small rural school district located in Kansas.

This study used a mixed-methods study approach to examine factors influencing stakeholder support of school bond referendums. Creswell (2014) claimed a researcher can assume quantitative and qualitative data provide different types of information, with “both limitations and strengths, we can consider how the strengths can be combined to develop a stronger understanding of the research problem or questions” (p. 215). Creswell argued that mixing the data sets can provide a stronger understanding of the problem or question.

The collection of three data sets (past campaign documents/artifacts, online survey and focus group interviews) allowed for the triangulation of data to confirm emerging or converging themes. This is known as Convergent Parallel Design research. Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011), while addressing the Convergent Parallel Design shared, “The rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data and results provide a general picture of the research problem; more analysis, specifically through qualitative data collection is needed to refine, extend or explain the general picture” (p. 572). The convergent parallel design study was utilized to analyze quantitative and qualitative data gathered in the study. The two sets of data (quantitative and qualitative) were compared to determine how results converge or diverge in support of variables that impact successful school bond campaigns. In Chapter Five, conclusions and implications for professional practice to the three research questions will be presented as well as

recommendations and potential for further research. This study was created to answer the following three research questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What rationale(s) for rural school bond referendum impact passage?
2. What are the challenges of communicating the rationale for a school bond referendum?
3. What are local community perceptions regarding the tax increases to support building or updating facilities?

### **Limitations**

The data collected in this study pertains to one rural school district in rural Kansas. Findings and results of this mixed-methods study apply specifically to this rural Kansas school district and should not automatically be considered applicable to other rural school districts in Kansas or other states. However, it is conceivable to believe the investigative strategies utilized in this study are applicable to other school districts. The recommendation for other school districts interested in conducting their own study is to reach out to as many non-school district employed stakeholders as possible. The key to understanding factors that influence school bond referendum success is through the actual school district stakeholders who vote, not solely through the school district employees, steering or campaign committee members or board of education members who most likely are supporters.

As the primary researcher of this study, I am known to all of the research participants. I have been employed by the district for 25 of the last 32 years. I have been involved with the school district in a social capacity for 32 years. I believe survey and interview participants were honest due to their familiarity with me as a school district employee, and also due to their integrity and desire to contribute to the success of the DVSD. A concerted effort was made to

emphasize the need for honesty and confidentiality during the collection of all data. No collected data, which identified any participant was shared with anyone, either through text or verbal communication. Only data shared in this completed dissertation is available to the public or school district personnel.

Lincoln & Guba (1985) emphasize the evaluation of the trustworthiness of a research study involves four criteria. That criteria includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln & Guba suggest a variety of techniques to ensure each of the four criteria are met. Credibility for this study was sought through the following techniques. 1) *Prolonged engagement* which was achieved by my 32 years as a community participant, which offered trust in my motives to do what is best for the Delaware Valley School District (DVSD). Numerous follow up questions during each initial focus group interview question allowed for clarification and the collection of more detailed data. Additionally, three open-ended questions were offer to all participants in the online survey. Peer debriefing tested and validated emerging themes. A retired administrator who lives in the nearby town of Farmdale agreed to be the peer debriefer. This administrator was not involved in this research study, but understands how school districts function. He was able to provide feedback on research clarity and other considerations about the research. Lastly, the *triangulation* of collected data (artifacts, quantitative, and qualitative) offered checks and balance for the emerging themes.

Transferability pertains to a detailed description of collected data in an effort to ensure recommendations are put into context and applied or transferred to another time. The summary and findings seeks to accomplish this task.

Dependability of the research data is sought to ensure that findings are consistent and replicable. A check in consistency was acquired by comparing the three collected data sets to ensure the themes repeated themselves amongst each set.

Lastly, confirmability was ensured by creating an *audit trail* or file of all collected data. All past school bond campaign folders from 1998, 1999 and 2004 were digitized, and included in this file along with focus group interview recordings, transcripts created from those recordings and online survey data results. All data is secured in a digital password protected folder. Additionally, (as previously mentioned) *triangulation* of multiple data sets was utilized.

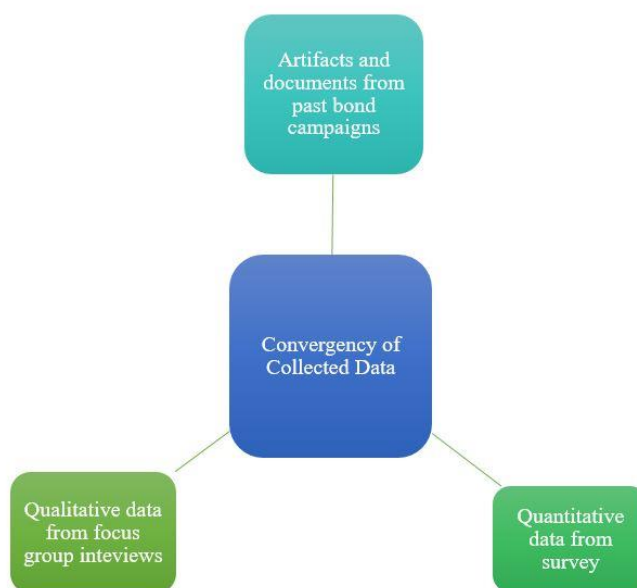
### **Summary of Results and Findings**

Chapter Four provided a breakdown of the primary data sets collected for this research study. Data was collected with the intention of providing a holistic view of DVSD stakeholder perceptions towards school bond referendums.

The convergent parallel design (Creswell & Pablo-Clark, 2011) is a process whereby qualitative and quantitative data are collected at relatively the same time, then the data is analyzed independently. Once the independent analysis of both data sets is complete, the data is merged to compare and contrast. By merging the sets of data, it allows for more in depth finding in the study. This mixed-methods study represents a pragmatic approach to research in terms of collecting multiple sets of data. It is recognized that quantitative and qualitative data have their limitations. Creswell (2014) opined, “Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality. This applies to mixed-methods research in that inquirers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage in their research” (p.11). Mixed in with this Convergent Parallel Design mixed-methods study are documents/artifacts from previous school bond referendums in the DVSD. These three data sets (qualitative,



quantitative and documents/artifacts) create a triangulation of data that allows the data to speak for itself in a holistic representation of the problem and confirms emerging themes. A description of collected data was shared in Chapter Four. This section of Chapter Five will cover the Convergent Parallel Design, with support of the triangulation of data sets to answer the research questions for this study.



**Figure 3**  
*Convergent Parallel Design Triangulation of Data*

### ***Research Questions 1***

**What rationale(s) for rural school bond referendum impact passage?**

#### **Quality Facilities.**

Stakeholders overwhelmingly support quality facilities. Should the DVSD wish to pass a school bond referendum, the need to maintain or acquire facilities that are conducive to learning and student programs should be a focus. Stakeholders also expressed support in having facilities that attract and retain quality teachers.

Stakeholders who completed the online survey overwhelmingly supported the importance of quality facilities. The vast majority (86.65%) of all survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed to the statement, “I believe that modern facilities are important and help create a learning environment that is essential for student learning”. Contrary to this, only 2.89% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement, while 10.47% were neutral. Furthermore, a higher percentage of survey respondents indicated modern facilities attract and retain quality teachers with 88.09% who strongly agree or agree with that statement. Only 2.53% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the importance of quality facilities in attracting and retaining quality teachers. A critical follow up questions was to determine how respondents felt about current DVSD facilities. Just over half, 55.95% indicate that current facilities are adequate for students at DVSD. Furthermore, 22.38% were neutral and 21.66% strongly disagree or disagree that current facilities were adequate. The neutral responses indicated those respondents aren’t familiar enough with the school district to form an opinion. If a need for new or improved facilities arises, the DVSD will need to accurately communicate that need as it could potential impact nearly 25% of the voting population.

When merged with data collected from the focus group interviews, themes definitely converged and supported stakeholder’s values of quality facilities. Multiple stakeholders from different communities shared their support for quality facilities. A4 commented:

We have to have a good education system, not just the academics and the sports part, but the whole building goes into the education system too. You can't expect a child to go into the high school where you've got one room and the child is sitting there and it's 90 degrees outside, but they're freezing to death because the AC, the HVAC system isn't up to date and working right. Go down two rooms and they're down there dying, because it's so hot. You can't expect them to learn and concentrate and be a good student in poor conditions like that, and it's not just the high school. It's all of our buildings that need to have the upgrades, and I think that's one of the things that probably needs to be stressed the most, is the care and comfort of those students.

C4 opined:

I feel like at some point for us to make Delaware Valley (pseudonym) somewhere that people wanna continue to move to and bring their kids to, we're gonna have to put something into it to start with. So those buildings that are starting to get ran down so we need to start doing the work upfront to keep up, otherwise, people are gonna wanna go other places. There's parts of the high school that... The theater, things like that, that haven't been touched for a long time, that are gonna have to be addressed.

E1 shared:

I'm very proud of the school, and I think it looks great, our grounds too, and it's pretty first-class looking to me. When you drive by our schools or some of these other schools, and I know they're smaller but we look pretty good sitting right there.

F1 commented:

Okay, I knew there was something, but a lot of those classrooms, it's like two classrooms in one, so they have a partition and so just, dated. The commons area, kind of a mixture between that and then you have the theater right there, just some updated facilities, like the gyms are nice, you know the middle school got some updates there and the high school gym's really nice, but just kind of the academic building specifically.

When asked about serious issues faced by the DVSD, focus group participant F1 shared, "I would say high school facilities, now that my kids are heading or have been in that building and are in that building, yeah, it makes me kinda sad, but I would say the high school." When asked to elaborate on specific facility concerns, F1 shared:

Well, the issue of the roof leaking a lot in various classrooms. Having been in some bigger districts' facilities, and I see the comparison, and it's... And I understand, those are bigger districts, but it's a big difference, the buildings are newer.

Add into these statement, previous mentioned concerns about elementary boiler systems, AC/heating issues and leaky roofs, it is clear that stakeholders value quality facilities that are conducive to learning.

### **Impact of the Local Board of Education on Rationale(s).**

Benzaquin's (2016) conducted research on a Wisconsin school district that successfully passed a school bond election after two previously failures. He determined that unanimous board

of education support was critical. The 1998 and 1999 school bond referendums did not receive a unanimous vote by board of education members, but the 2004 bond referendum did. During the focus group interviews, numerous stakeholders spoke to the importance of transparency and putting everything on the table. Unanimous support by the local board of education for the school bond proposal is critical in its successful passage (Dunbar, 1991; Weathersby, 2002; Holt, 2002; Mobley, 2007; Kraus, 2009; and Adams, 2017). A split vote of support by the board of education may cause suspicion by stakeholders that something is wrong with the proposal. Research speaks to the importance of a unanimous board vote before presenting any proposed school bond referendum to stakeholders. It provides confidence for community stakeholders that the school bond referendum was thoroughly vetted and represents a consensus of how best to address the school district's needs. It creates a valid rationale for supporting the school bond referendum. Hanover (2012) stated, "Research emphasized that districts must 'clearly articulate' the rationale and ensure that rationale "reflects community priorities and is based on research" (p. 4).

### **Quid Pro Quo.**

As a result of consolidation of school districts back in the 1960's, the researcher investigated whether any animosity between previous school district stakeholders still existed. As shared in the review of the focus group interview qualitative data, animosity still exists but it appears those feelings are more with the elderly population. Still, there is a perception of division within the DVSD that must be considered with any future school bond proposals. An online survey respondent opined, "Seems that to be successful with bonds, all towns and especially all grades need to "get something" in order for bond vote to pass". A second respondent shared:

I believe we should follow the formula of last successful bond issue. Need to have facility upgrades/additions on both sides of the river and every grade level building has

something that will garner support. Perhaps new Elementary building in the Division 1 sports facility area combined with a fine arts building in proximity to current Middle/High school campus.

The perception with most stakeholders suggests the tension rests primarily between the towns of Comiskey and Shay. Focus group participant E1 expressed a concern for animosity between communities when sharing, “I’d love to see those (elementary buildings) put in that ground south of the high school. I know Shay will never let that happen, but I could see us with a nice new grade school all together.”

B1 shared, “there is definitely still animosity between the Comiskey and Shea, but not so much with Fenway or Wrigley”. D2 stated the reason for the failed recreation commission was “the perception was it was gonna be centered on Comiskey”. B1 shared this animosity was visible in the past year during fundraising and after prom planning. It (animosity) is passed down from generation to generation of Comiskey stealing from Shay, closing their school, that type of thing, and it’s still very much a problem.” E1 concurred “There is problems there. There is, between Comiskey and Shea.” A2 shared: “I still know people in Shay who will not come across the bridge to Comiskey. There were really hard feelings in the '60s over the forced consolidation. It doesn't flow so much south, but it sure flows north.” E1 commented, “When I was in high school I wasn't supposed to date anybody from Shay, and I grew up here. Yeah. You didn't go across the river, but I did anyway.” An online survey respondent from Comiskey commented, “I believe that every bond election the DVSD has ever had is always overshadowed by a negative response from the Shay area. It doesn't matter what we do or what we need. Shay ruins it for all of us.”

When data sets are converged, there is little information to support the perception that Shay ruins everything. The data from the online survey shed no data of Shay residents expressing

any frustration towards the communities of Fenway, Comiskey, or Wrigley. Only one comment from the focus group interviews involving a Shay resident alluded to potential animosity between Comiskey and Shay residents. C4's comment also supported the emerging Quid Pro Quo theme:

I have heard a lot of the people my grandparents age make comments about Comiskey vs. Shay. Even with our business in Shay, we have been told that some older Comiskey people won't come over here to eat because it's in Shay. I have also heard my mom talk about how there is animosity between the Comiskey people and the Shay people in my grandparents age group because the high school was taken from Shay and put in Comiskey. I think that in the future for the older population to vote for a bond issue they are going to have to feel like their individual community is going to benefit from the proposal. I think it would be difficult to pass a bond to get rid of the elementary school in Shay. I feel like my generation doesn't quite have the animosity that the older population had because Comiskey and Shay were together when we went through school.

Upon further review of the 2004 school bond artifacts, evidence that Shay residents will not support a school bond referendum for new facilities in Comiskey was not found. Although the 2004 school bond referendum did include an addition to Shay Elementary, it did provide a new middle school facility in Comiskey. A breakdown of the vote demonstrated a higher percentage of voters in the Shay precincts supported the 2004 school bond referendum than all three towns (Fenway, Comiskey and Wrigley) combined. The 2004 results included 68% of the residents in the Shay precincts supporting the school bond referendum which included a new facility in Comiskey, while 61% of the residents in Fenway, Comiskey and Wrigley supported the school bond referendum.

Addressing the apparent animosity between the towns of Comiskey and Shay cannot be ignored. Although the focus group interview responses suggest the friction is between the older generations of stakeholders, that friction is present none-the-less. Strategies to engage the older generation from all four communities might be worth consideration. It is critical to remember that the reality of the situation and the perception of the situation are two different things. In the

end, you must deal with the perceptions (right or wrong) because they are sometimes embedded in the minds of the beholder and can ultimately impact the vote.

### ***Research Question 2***

#### **What are the challenges of communicating the rationale for a school bond referendum?**

Communication is critical because it provides the rationale for the proposed school bond referendum. Converging themes from the triangulated data include:

1) The importance of letting community stakeholders lead the charge in addressing the need, rather than school district officials.

2) The importance of addressing inaccurate information or rumors promoted by the opposition. It was noted the presence of social media has made it even more difficult to deal with false or inaccurate information being circulated about the proposed school bond referendums.

3) A final theme that converged from both qualitative and quantitative data sets was the difficulty in reaching stakeholders who are not affiliated with the school district due to age/retired or no children attending the DVSD. Print literature was viewed as a must.

#### **Community Stakeholders Lead the Charge.**

When comparing the three campaign folders from 1998, 1999, and 2004, the DVSD clearly implemented an improved and organized strategy plan to communicate the importance and rationale of the proposed school bond referendum of 2004. Unlike the elections in 1998 and 1999, professionally created colored brochures, stickers and buttons worn by school bond supporters and door-to-door campaigning were included in 2004. The campaign was led by community stakeholders, including the door-to-door canvassing. These promotional communication strategies were led by community stakeholders and were significantly impactful, resulting in the only successful new facility school bond election in the past fifty years. Having

stakeholders who are not employed by the DVSD communicate the rationale or need for the new facilities was certainly impactful to the success of the 2004 school bond election. This strategy was also supported by participants in the focus group interviews. F4 shared:

I know our neighbors came over and talked with us about it. I think that was actually a key piece, I think it was something that we understood more after hearing what exactly the school really needed and helped us to make our decision in that.

F1 concurred, “I was new to Delaware Valley (pseudonym) at that time, and I remember there was people that came door-to-door to talk about it and answer any questions, that's what stands out in my mind during that, for the middle school bond”. B2 shared, “You need to have somebody in every community that's not just on the board, I think. It needs to be a coalition of people that are respected, can stand up and speak, can go out and persuade”. E4 opined:

Folks willing to knock on doors makes a lot of difference. Because you have the opportunity to ask questions and provide input, that's probably what's been the most difficult about COVID. If I wanna go visit a customer or someone that I can't go visit. So there's a lot of things you lose in terms of non-verbal cues, if you just have a phone call with them, or you just have an email because I might read it one way and somebody reads it another, so that interaction piece is pretty valuable.

D4a maintained, “I think that's where you need to have that committee of patrons, whether that run the gamut from those that have had kids that have graduated, those that have never had children, and include the students in there.” An online survey comment from Comiskey stated, “Your local board members and staff need to appear in all communities on behalf of the school bond election. The appeal must be broader than just the superintendent.”

### **Challenging the Rumors Promoted by the Opposition.**

Rationales for each school bond referendums differ depending on need. What does not change with each school bond referendum is the ability to fully communicate that rationale without creating suspicion that the school district is not being transparent. Feedback from DVSD stakeholders support the desire for explicit and clear communication from the district stating its



rationale for the proposed school bond referendum. The clear articulation of the rationale, in the face of rumors, regardless of what that rationale might be, is the biggest challenge in successfully passing a school bond referendum. C4 shared:

I think districts are gonna really have to state their why. I think you're gonna really have to break down, we need a new theater because of this, this and this, or we need whatever. But I think you're gonna have to really break down your why and explain those things as well.

D2 shared his experience in the 2004 successful school bond election promotion campaign.

When we did the middle school, I was involved with the speaker's bureau, and I can't remember, I think we made presentations to maybe as many as 40 different groups, and I think that was real effective. Going out to people where they are and presenting accurate information as to what's being proposed and answering questions accurately. So because, in this day and age with social media, misinformation is as big of a factor as anything, in terms of us having something go down to defeat.

An online survey comments from a Comiskey resident opined "Information has not been easily accessed by the public. And now social media spreads wrong information too quickly.

The district doesn't respond quickly or at all to the negative feedback. F1 concluded "I think it's when you get the negativity type stuff on social media, I think it snowballs with a lot of misinformation". D4a focus group member stated:

That's about the best way you can handle anything like that, is just to make sure that you have an answer for every negative that they put out there, and then it needs to be multiple people not just school officials because they're gonna say, "Well, that's a superintendent, that's his job, he's gotta say that," or "That's the elementary principal, they've got to say things like that to keep their job." Where if you had just everyday people that live in the district or students that go to the school there, they would make it... To me, that would... that would hold more water with me when I came to looking at those answers.

The previous comment by focus group D4a was supported by artifacts and documents analyzed from the 1998, 1999 and 2004 bond referendum campaigns. As previously noted, the 2004 campaign committee strategically utilized a community stakeholder, who was vocally against the 1998 and 1999 school bond referendums, as a spokesperson in a local newspaper

article. A picture of this person presenting at a town hall meeting was included in a local newspaper article with a caption that said, “The board has it right this time!” Considering the 2004 successful school bond referendum was clearly organized, led and promoted by a committee of approximately 40 stakeholders, D4a’s comments are accurate.

### **Communicating in a Digital Age.**

Stakeholder participants from all focus group interviews were adamant about the need to bring back the hardcopy newsletter. D4a shared,

I know my parents would enjoy knowing what's going on with the newsletter. I know that it's expensive to send out newsletters and that type of stuff but it's just something I think that's gotta be done. So I see that they would pre-implement the letters monthly or whatever to the tax payers. Everybody doesn't have a computer, everybody doesn't get online, and I think when it comes to an election, it's the older people who very faithfully vote, and if they don't feel like they're a part of something like the school district, they may not vote favorably. But I think most of the older people are very...favorable for education. They just like to be included.

D4b concurred with D4a stating:

I was on the committee that did the last bond for the new middle school, and it was very helpful when we sent out flyers and trifolds to the patrons that didn't necessarily have students in the district. And I know right now I have three grandkids in the district, but I miss getting that at least every other month, some kind of a newsletter to keep me up to-date on what's going on, and I think that's what you're gonna need to do to get the information out. 'Cause like (D4a said), not everybody has access to the internet, living in a rural community, we don't have the fiber optic internet out where I'm at, you have to do satellite, which can get a little pricey.

A4 stated: “A lot of us do not have internet, so something in the mail would be awesome to remind us, to tell us of the needs that the school has”. McDonough, C. (2015) stated, “Lower use rates of computers and the internet among older adults have important social and cost ramifications. As the internet becomes more integrated into everyday life, people who do not use the internet are more likely to become more disenfranchised and disadvantaged.” Whether a school district leader supports McDonough’s statement or not is unimportant. A district’s

methods of communicating with stakeholders must consider those who are hesitant or unable to engage digitally and provide alternate means of disseminating information to reach them.

As indicated earlier, the successful DVSD bond referendum of 2004 utilized professionally created colorful posters, brochures, wearable stickers and mailing. Countless face-to-face engagements through door-to-door campaign and town hall meetings were implemented.

Perhaps an indication the DVSD is not reaching all stakeholders in the school district was illustrated by the survey question “Delaware Valley schools consistently communicates the current needs of the school district to all stakeholders”. Only 65.9% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, with 20.94 indicating neutrality to the question. Should the DVSD push for a school bond referendum, it will be imperative that all stakeholders are engaged with the planning process, supported by a clear understanding of the rationale or need as determined by all stakeholders.

### ***Research Question 3***

#### **What are local community perceptions regarding the tax increases to support school building or updating facilities?**

The overarching theme from triangulation of the three data sets is that DVSD stakeholders are concerned about taxes; some even express concern that property taxes for DVSD residents are one of the highest tax rates in the state. Regardless, stakeholder overwhelmingly believe if the need is clearly communicated, a school bond referendum will be successful. Perhaps focus group participant E3, a participant from the agriculture/rancher demographic summed up the overall theme best: “The perception is if NEEDED, we will support it. If desired or want it, then that will be a struggle to gain support.” The word “needed” was prevalent among all data sets. Stakeholders need to clearly understand what the need is and how

money will be spent to address that need. To frivolously spend money on facilities that are not needed will be frowned upon. Due to stakeholder concerns of having one of the highest property tax rates in Kansas, numerous responses indicated a need to pay off any previous school bonds before proposing a new school bond referendum.

According to Tax Rates.org (2021), “The median property tax in Kansas is \$1,625 per year for a home worth the median value of \$125,000.” The DVSD is geographically located with two counties in northeastern Kansas. The county where Fenway, Comiskey and Wrigley is located has an average property tax of \$1,779, which is slightly above the state average. The county where Shay is located has an average property tax of \$2,221, which is significantly above the state average and slightly below the state’s highest average of \$2,664. It should be noted that tax rates are impacted by the value of the property so Shay residents, especially those that live near the community of Farmdale, potentially own property of higher value.

In an effort to triangulate the emerging theme, it should be noted the 2004 school bond referendum was the only successful election for a new facility in the past 52 years. It was also the only time the campaign committee provided mill levy increase information for farmland. Previous school bond campaigns only provided mill levy increase information for home owners. Additionally, the 2004 campaign committee was clearly led by community stakeholders who also implemented door-to-door campaigning, a strategy that was not implemented in 1998 or 1999.

Online survey participants made the following comments regarding the importance of communicating the rationale for the school bond referendum and transparency in terms of cost to all taxpayers.

- Bond issues that promote improvements to facilities tend to be easier to pass. Investment is visible and directly benefits all students. At the time of the proposed formation of a Recreation Committee, this community was losing a grocery store that served our most vulnerable members of the community. (Just bad timing, really.)
- It's difficult to gain support for tax increases in such a conservative state. I do think we need stronger communication and justification when these requests are put forth.
- Too much focus on tax increases rather than the good it would bring.
- Make sure to give enough information about why our district needs whatever it is that will raise our taxes. The more we educate the community, I think the more they will accept it.
- Having a set plan for the use of the increased mill increase. Getting input from all patrons.
- Where the money is actually going. Being able to show the taxpayers where their money is going.
- Involve the community in making decisions; there is a rather large number of retired folks living in our community that are on a fixed income; will the "improvement" be for the kids or teachers; is the improvement worth the money or is it just a patch to a current issue.
- A mill increase should be an absolute need not just a want. It is always easier to spend other people's money and not be fiscally responsible.
- How it will benefit the students or staff? Is it worth our tax money? Will it better the community/economy?

- I'm not sure there is an argument that convinces a person who is just anti-tax to support a tax increase. The best you can hope for is to convince them of need not want, and that it will be worth it.
- Let the people of the district who don't have school aged kids know how the money is needed to keep relevant/ competitive in the state with education. And lastly don't always make it about the needs of a sporting team.
- I am happy to pay more taxes to support our schools. I feel the district needs to do a better job building a case and communicating so that we have a better chance of passing mill increases.
- A strong case should always be made when asking taxpayers to pay more. In house spending should always be transparent and clear of obvious waste before asking for more from the taxpayers.

Focus group interview participants shared similar responses that supported this converging theme.

- E3 opined: "Nobody's against spending money for education if the need is there."
- There are people who own land in the district who do not live or have the right to vote in the district (i.e. absentee land owners). This results in taxation without representation. This results in people who have no ability to vote, get no direct benefit from the mill levy issue, but are paying significant dollars in taxes to contribute to the project. For example, we have landowners that we farm for who own land in multiple Kansas counties and states who complain that their land in Delaware Valley (pseudonym) district is the highest property tax that they have.

- There are property owners and landowners that do not live in the district that do not have the right to vote on school bond elections. These people pay taxes but cannot vote on the tax issues that they won't get any benefit from which is paying taxes without representation. Property taxes in Delaware County (pseudonym) are higher than most other counties.
- I feel that some people just don't want to pay for anything. If there is a vote that might mean that they will have to pay more money, then they are against it.
- Previous bonds should be paid off and that should be communicated with taxpayers and community before a new bond is voted on unless in a case of an absolute emergency. That is being fiscally responsible to the taxpayers and businesses who ultimately help fund the schools. There are opportunities for bonds down the road, but many I have talked to would not consider anything until previous bond is paid off. Could have a Celebrate Bond Debt-Free Day to communicate a thanks to the taxpayers and may open up opportunities for another one down the road.
- Due to the way the money was spent and the lack of "Supervision" with the building of the Middle School, I feel like it will be extremely hard to pass another bond issue.
- Taxpayer input with FULL disclosures, Audit of current budget, local consultants on needs and costs.
- The Mill levy increase is much higher for business owners and land owners which is much higher than the dollars per household. This makes this a higher disproportionate payment of taxes. The district should pay off older bonds first instead of adding more.

Instead of taxing people that don't live in the district or who do not have kids going to Delaware Valley, the families with participants should still have to pay a fee instead of the rec commission if there was a rec commission.

- Impacts to our elderly population living on fixed incomes. Any corresponding tax increases and the associated timing. Prioritizing needs of the district.
- Current tax burden on property owners in the district - property tax making it difficult for seniors living on fixed income to afford to stay in their homes is a real thing; responsible use of funds- in my work, I see school districts, cities and counties taking on extraordinary bond debt in these uncertain economic times; how will school change in the future - use of online learning, etc.
- Current taxation rates differ between the different counties that make up the district county valuations of property differ greatly between the counties that make up the school district.
- Timing a new bond with the retiring of an old one when possible so there is minimal net increase is important in less prosperous districts.
- Not all tax payers have children in the school system. Increasing taxes on a low income resident of Comisky (pseudonym) to cover the increased student load from the Division 1 athletic complex area is not acceptable.
- In 2018 my property taxes increased by 52% because of mill increases. This in turn increased my mortgage payment. We bought our house in 2017 with a monthly payment of \$1100. We now pay \$1600. All this due to mill increases. If this keeps happening, Delaware Valley will lose people because it will be such an unaffordable county/area to live.



- Make sure that the patrons of Delaware Valley know the impacts the mill levy will have, both good and bad for the schools.
- Cost of living, I think the cost of living is already outpacing pay increases for employees, so families are making due with less already. Plus we have high property taxes in our county already.
- I know one time, a previous superintendent had a big bond issue when some developers bought some ground near where Allied Plastics is now, the new warehouse. There'll be this many houses. This is how many houses is going up and we're going to have to build a school, well that never did happen. And it failed because, to me, I think...they'll see it starting to happen and then, oh it won't take too long to build a house, but let them help pay for it instead of all of us paying for it. Because I'm putting a lot out there, but you can show on a bond issue that it's only gonna cost this much money or raise your taxes this much on \$150,000 house or whatever. That's true on residential, but out here in the agriculture part or a commercial or business owner their buildings are double that. And so that's hard sometimes to swallow, especially in the Ag... And in the commercial businesses too, hardwood store or whatever. It's hard because you've then got to raise your prices to recoup that and we can't. We don't. We go with whatever the market is at that time. And there's just no way to figure that extra cost in.

F3 summarized, “Well nobody wants their taxes to go up or...so everybody's very sensitive to that, but you also want your property values to maintain.” As Florence (2014) recommended, a school district should conduct its own survey to better understand the district’s reputation with taxpayers, well in advance of any bond proposal.

### **Connections to the Problem of Practice**

DVSD stakeholders overwhelmingly stated the need to clearly communicate the rationale for a school bond referendum. The DVSD must collaborate with all stakeholders to determine what is needed so that all stakeholders, including those without students attending the school district, understand the need and support the collaboratively determined answer to addressing those needs. There is certainly a reality of actual needs versus perceived needs. School bond referendum campaign committees must understand stakeholder perceptions of current facility needs (right or wrong) before moving forward with any plans to present a school bond proposal. Stakeholder perceptions, based on false rumors, will quickly destroy any support of a school bond referendum. If stakeholders believe we haven't addressed the boilers in the elementary buildings, leaking roofs, or AC/heating issues, they will be reluctant to support a school bond referendum for new facilities. The fact all three of these issues (elementary boilers, leaky roofs, and AC/heating issues) have or are currently being addressed with capital outlay funds, yet stakeholders are not aware of it, indicates a need for more effective communication strategies by the DVSD. Learning about the impact of distribution of inaccurate information was surprising to me. Future school bond campaign committees must be proactive and identify potential false rumors before implementing any type of school bond campaign. The data from this study emphasized the important of addressing any potential rumors before they take flight and the impact it has on a successful school bond election.

Communication primarily through the internet is not enough. Prior to completing this study, I viewed the use of the internet as the primary method of communicating to school district stakeholders as adequate. As a result of analyzing the collected data from this study, this viewpoint has evolved. This study has clarified that relying on social media and district

webpages to communicate district information is insufficient. Communication through the internet does not guarantee engagement with all stakeholders, especially senior citizens, those who do not have personal social media accounts or those without children attending the DVSD. The attitude that stakeholders should be interested enough in our school district to go find information on the internet is inappropriate and ineffective. It became very clear that school districts must aggressively seek communication avenues that engage all stakeholders, even if that communication strategy appears “old school”, such as hardcopy newsletters or postal mail. DVSD stakeholders of all ages clearly articulated their desire for hardcopy newsletters mailings, as opposed to using the internet as the primary source of communication. Sending out hardcopy newsletters through postal mail will unfortunately create additional cost to the DVSD, but consideration must be given to the value added by the additional costs if they address the difficulty of engaging DVSD stakeholders.

There were drastic differences in 1998, 1999 and 2004 campaign strategies. It was clearly evident that 1) letting district stakeholders lead the charge was more important than I imagined. 2) The impact that professional creative brochures, posters, stickers of support for clothing can have on the outcome. The 1998 and 1999 school bond referendum campaign information appeared to be primarily led by school district officials with campaign flyers created by the school district copy machine. The 2004 campaign was led by an organized group of school district stakeholders who used fundraising to cover the cost of professionally created campaign literature. Although the needs of the district have not changed in four years, the strategies of communicating that need changed drastically. Those strategies significantly influenced the outcome of the 2004 school bond referendum.

## **Discussion and Recommendations for Professional Practice**

The purpose of this study is to examine factors influencing stakeholder support of a school bond referendum in a rural Kansas school district. As such, it is critical that readers understand these specific recommendation are made for a rural Kansas school district where the research was undertaken. What might be applicable in this rural school district may not be relevant in other rural school districts in Kansas or nationwide due to the unique circumstances of each school district. Variables that contribute to the problem of practice in one district may be different from another district. However, the research strategies implemented in this study are transferable to any school district in Kansas or nationwide. Variables that contribute to this particular study include property valuation, ineffective communication, issues related to district consolidation, trust in district leadership, or simply whether or not district stakeholders value public education and believe quality school facilities are conducive to a student's learning environment. Individual school districts should conduct their own study to understand their respective problems of practice regarding school bond referendum success. Upon completion of individual school district studies, a comparison of similar factors could be made to this study. Based on this mixed-methods study, recommended practices for influencing a successful school bond campaign in the rural Kansas school district include the following sequential recommendations, followed by a flowchart illustrating these recommended steps.

### ***Recommendations***

1. **Long Term Strategic Facility Plan:** The school district must first establish what the needs are that warrant taxpayer support for a school bond referendum. It is highly recommended the DVSD create a long term strategic facility plan that is shared with all district stakeholders. This ongoing strategic plan should be evaluated annually and that

evaluation should be shared with stakeholders. The more aware stakeholders are regarding conditions of current facilities and potential future needs, the greater chance they will want to be part of the solution.

2. **Holistic Stakeholder Engagement:** Engage stakeholders from every demographic group, including those without children attending the school district such as retirees. District leadership should consider it their due diligence to research and uncover every perception held by each demographic group. Fact or fiction, perceptions are reality in the eyes of the beholder. As previously mentioned, the reality of the situation and the perception of the situation are different. In the end, school districts must identify and address all false perceptions before moving forward with a school bond referendum plan. The campaign committee should be involved from start (initial planning) to finish (post-election celebration or debriefing). This committee, comprised mostly of community stakeholders, will review the needs assessment provided by the school district, assist with the creation and administration of perceptual data tools (survey/focus group interviews) that will be offered to all community stakeholders. Do not make decisions based on a quantitative survey only. The collection of qualitative data through community focus group interviews is a must. One focus group for each community within the school district with multiple demographic groups represented must occur. Make it a point of emphasis to engage district stakeholders who are not affiliated with the school district. These voters are much less likely to fully understand the needs of the school district, yet carry significant influence at the polls when voting on school bond referendums.
3. **Review Feedback and Determine Support:** The committee that created the long-term strategic facility plan should consider stakeholder feedback and make adjustments as

necessary. This process needs to be driven and influenced by stakeholders who ultimately determine whether the bond referendum passes.

4. **Establish Campaign Steering Committee with Influential Stakeholder Support:**

Once the school district determines a school bond referendum is needed, it should establish community stakeholder committees to lead the charge. It is critical to gain the support of respected district stakeholders who are *not* employees of the district and can serve as spokespersons. These stakeholders should lead the charge, with support from the school board and school district personnel. It is not advisable to move forward with a school bond proposal unless you have stakeholder representation from each community and each demographic group. The more respected that community stakeholder is, the better chance your school bond referendum will pass. Acquisition of support from previous opposition could greatly impact the success of the school bond referendum.

5. **Campaign Steering Committee Proposal:** The campaign committee should review the

collected stakeholder perceptual data and address issues, concerns or questions that arise. Once the committee has explicitly reviewed the school district needs assessment and reviewed stakeholder concerns, they should work collaboratively with school district officials to create a plan to address the needs. The plan should be taken back to the community stakeholders for review and feedback before a school bond referendum is proposed.

6. **Final Feedback from Stakeholders:** To promote transparency and assure that the school

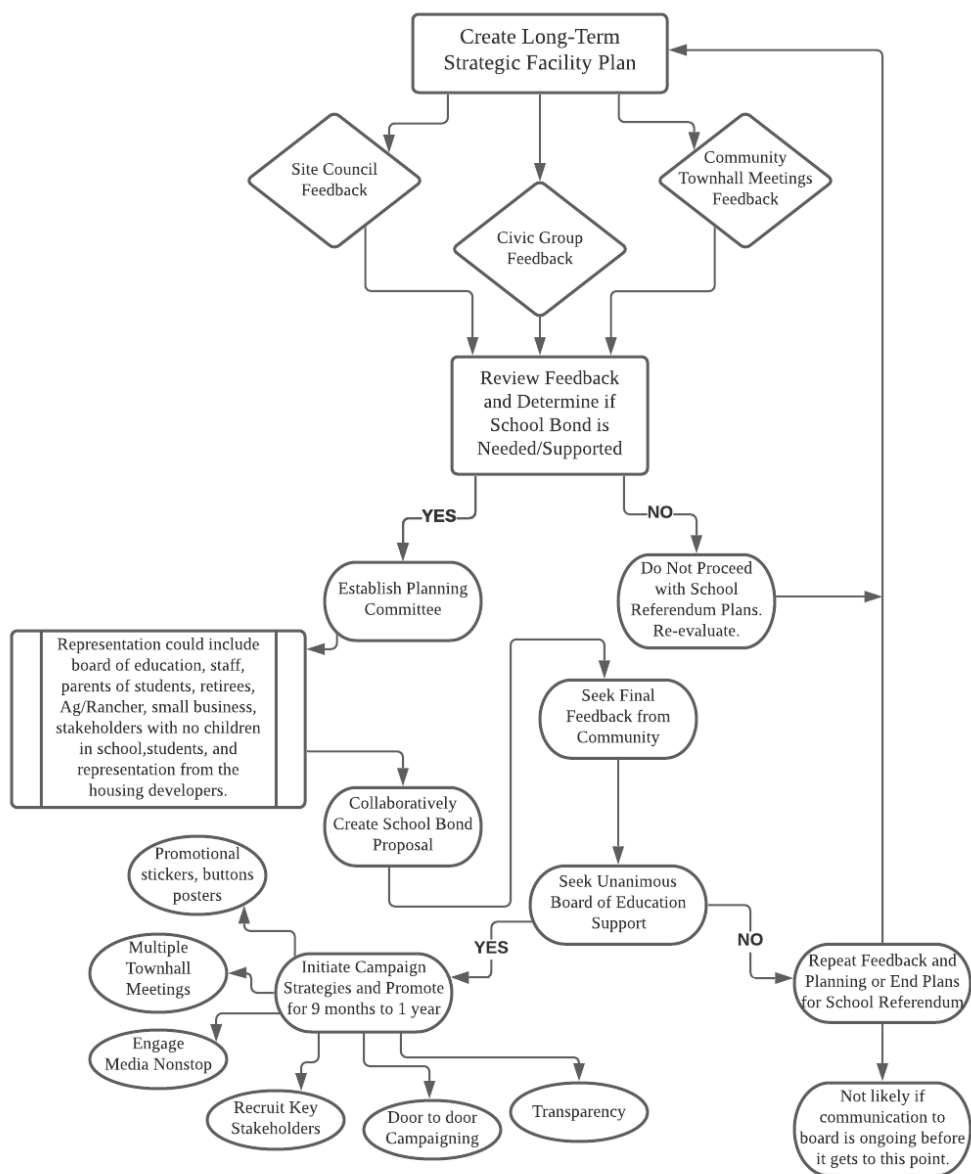
bond proposal addresses needs and will be supported by stakeholders, the updated plan should be present to stakeholders a final time before presenting to the board of education.

7. **Obtain Unanimous Board of Education Approval:** Do not start the campaign process unless the school district has a unanimous vote of support from the board of education.
8. **Campaign Promotion by Stakeholders:** Communicate the needs of the school district and rationale for the school bond referendum through hard copy materials, including, but not limited to, post cards, flyers and newsletters. Relying on digital communication to promote the bond referendum will be detrimental to the process of engaging all voters, particularly when attempting to engage those demographic groups most loyal to the voting process, such as senior citizens and/or retirees. Consistent communication with all stakeholders is necessary. This can be accomplished through newspaper articles; news segments on the local TV station; social media post; monthly, then bi-weekly post cards or flyers mailed to the physical address; use of digital roadside signs; stickers and buttons available for supporters to wear; announcements at games; and information tables set up at school and community events. This is not an all-inclusive list of engagement strategies but simply a starting point. The goal is to assure that all stakeholders are fully informed of the issues surrounding the school bond referendum prior to Election Day. Simply providing an opportunity or platform where stakeholders can access information is not effective. The campaign committee must aggressively take the message or rationale to the voting population and provide an opportunity for stakeholders to ask question in a town hall format. The past history of bond referendum success and failure in the DVSD has proven that three months of campaigning before the election is detrimental to its success. The DVSD campaigned for nearly a year before its only successful school bond referendum in the past 50 years.

9. **Transparency:** In an effort to ensure full transparency, provide very explicit and detailed information about “*who*” will benefit from the proposed school bond referendum and “*why*” it is needed. “*What*” is being proposed in the school bond referendum should be presented in an understandable format. “*When*” will taxes increase and for how long? *When* will construction begin and *when* will the new facility or new facility be ready for occupancy? *Where* will the facility be located? DVSD stakeholders prefer detailed information about tax increases associated with the school bond referendum. Information on tax increases for the different types of landowners should be provided. As previously noted, the 2004 school bond campaign included tax increase information for home owners and land owners. Landowners are taxed differently depending on how the land is used. Although DVSD stakeholders clearly communicated a desire to see a breakdown of tax increases, research indicates tax salience can decrease the likelihood of a successful bond election (Brunner, Robbins, and Simonsen 2020). These researchers reviewed hundreds of bond election results over a ten year period in the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota and determined school bond elections were less likely to pass by up to 10 percentage points when the primary focal point was on property tax impact. Sharing a benefit statement or slogan as the only strategy to offset concerns for higher taxes was not found to be beneficial. However, creating a list of multiple benefits might help offset higher tax concerns. Considering this research, DVSD should be transparent about the tax commitment but focus primary on the need and how it will benefit students.



### Bond Referendum Investigation Flow Chart



**Figure 4**  
*Recommended steps for passing a bond referendum.*

Research guidelines or strategies from this study are transferable to other school districts.

The key to understanding perceptions is to authentically engaging stakeholders from all demographics. This study revealed the overwhelming support for hard copy/material

communication from school district. Additionally, the need to engage all community stakeholders in the planning, decision-making and implementation of any bond referendum proposals. As such, school district must follow due diligence with engagement of stakeholders as they seek to better understand perceptions that can potential impact the success of a bond referendum. It is recognized this process is terribly time consuming and requires hard work and dedication from stakeholders who choose to become part of it. However, the end reward will be quite satisfying as district stakeholders rally together for a common goal that benefits students.

### **Implications of this Study**

This mixed-methods study focused on the major stakeholders and their perceptions in one rural school district in the state of Kansas. The emerging themes resulting from the combination of qualitative and quantitative data are applicable solely to this school district. Randomly applying recommendations of this study to another rural school district in Kansas or the United States is not recommended due to the autonomy of each school district and its stakeholder perceptions. Following the research strategies utilized within this study are recommended.

Implications in the DVSD include the overwhelming and unquestionable support for hardcopy newsletters or other information materials mailed to all in-district residents. Without this study, the DVSD may not have discovered the overwhelming support of stakeholders to communicate in a non-digital format or platform. This support was voiced across demographic groups.

Understanding stakeholder perceptions about current facility needs can greatly influence battles with the opposition. Prior to this study, the DVSD was unaware that stakeholders believed the land purchased south of the high school was secretly added to the 2004 school bond referendum. If not addressed by the campaign committee, this belief could cause distrust with

DVSD stakeholders. Additionally, knowing that stakeholders believe multiple buildings need major infrastructure upgrades could cause district stakeholders to believe district officials are not managing district funds or appropriately maintaining current buildings. The fact both elementary buildings now have new heating/AC, leaky roofs in both elementary buildings will have been addressed by summer of 2021, and AC/heating issues at the DVSD secondary buildings were addressed during the summer of 2020 should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders.

Research by Kraus (2009) found "...unsuccessful districts opined that there had not been enough genuine two-way communication in their districts and that there was a certain level of mistrust between district officials and the voters" (p. 109). Furthermore, Kraus (2009) stressed the importance of listening when determining the wishes of all community stakeholders. As a result of this study, it should be clear that school districts should make a concerted effort to conduct their own mixed-methods study into the perceptions of stakeholders in their school district. They might be surprised of what they learn.

### **Theoretical Implications of the Study**

The conceptual framework (p. 47) was developed to investigate the relationship between factors that influence the success of a bond referendum. A surprising result of this study was the desire of stakeholders to have hard copy material communication from the school district. This potentially influential factor was not addressed in the literature review, but was overwhelmingly discussed in the focus group interviews. Additionally, the importance of town hall meetings or focus group interviews was also identified by DVSD stakeholders as important.

DVSD stakeholders clearly supported the notion that non-school district employees should lead promotional activities associated with school bond referendums. Quid Pro Quo considerations were identified as important by numerous individuals in both the online survey

and focus groups. School district towns do not want to lose their school building. Those buildings provide identity for the communities which they reside. Town who lost their school buildings were vocal about their dissatisfaction and those towns who still have buildings located within city limits expressed concern about maintaining that location within city limits. This study clearly supported the notion that any plans for future school district changes must include input from all demographic stakeholders, whether they have children attending the DVSD or not.

Although timing of a school bond referendum was identified in previous research as critical, only one or two stakeholders identified timing of the school bond referendum as important. This conclusion diverged from the literature review in Chapter 2. Ultimately, the rationale behind the proposed bond referendum and the ability or skill to successfully communicate that rationale were deemed most important by DVSD stakeholders.

### **Professional Practice Implications**

While Waters (2004) argued that overall literature supports a “low-key” profile by district officials, his research found a majority (56.6%) of his survey participants, (school board members, school district administrators, and advisory committee members), felt it was important. Godown (2010) stated “The superintendent should present the school bond referendum to as many constituents as possible.” Contrary to both Waters and Godown, DVSD stakeholders were adamant that school district stakeholders lead the charge with promoting any proposed bond referendum. A 60-69 year old Comiskey resident emphasized “The appeal must be broader than just the superintendent.” Contrary to Waters and Godown, DVSD stakeholders desire more involvement in decision(s) that represent change. Stakeholders prefer to lead the charge.

Benzaquen (2016) emphasized the importance of communication to the success of a bond referendum by stating, “Effective communication remained the main overarching reason for

success.” DVSD stakeholders communicated the need for accurate and transparent communication on the rationale and cost of any proposed bond referendum and desired a need for hard copy materials as a form of communication. This conclusion represents a need for change in current DVSD practices of offering hard copy school district calendars or newsletters to stakeholder who requests it. Instead, DVSD officials may need to consider mailing out newsletters and calendars once again or determining a sufficient method of getting these newsletters/calendars to those who desire it.

Although DVSD stakeholders were vocal about maintaining school buildings within respective town city limits, this study demonstrated that school bond referendums can still be successful and supported by all district towns. In 2004, the proposed bond referendum included a new middle school in the town of Comiskey. Shay, the rival town that some stakeholders in Comiskey believe would never support any bond referendums for new facilities in Comiskey, actually approved the proposed bond referendum by a larger percentage margin than Comiskey. Voters south of the river in precincts associated with Shay approved the new middle school by a vote of 68% to 32% disapproving. Yet, only 61% of the voters on the north side of the river, where the town of Comiskey is located, supported the proposed bond referendum.

In conclusion, this study alludes to the importance of taking all relevant or important information to district stakeholders, rather than simply providing a social media page with information about how to acquire it. More effective and efficient strategies must be created to put this information in the hands of all stakeholders. The DVSD must find ways to put the information in the hands of stakeholders, rather than count on interested stakeholders gaining access to it through their own efforts.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Factors that influence the success of a school bond referendum vary considerably from district to district and should be considered an arduous task at best. Although tax valuations from urban, suburban, and rural school districts may greatly vary, the process of gathering stakeholder perceptions is similar. If stakeholders are allowed to lead the charge for support in a school bond referendum, there appears to be a significant chance the school bond election will ultimately succeed. A strategic plan by any individual or consulting firm that does not understand the values or perceptions unique to an individual school district will undermine a successful school bond referendum campaign. This study focused on perception in one Kansas rural school district, but recommendations for future research could potentially apply to any size or geographical located school district. These three recommendations include:

1. Every school district must investigate the autonomous variables that impact stakeholder support of school bond referendums in each individual school district. Do not apply general strategies for success recommended by researchers or companies that do not understand the variables that impact support in your school district.
2. Past public school bond election research has focused on supporters of the school bond referendum. Much of the data (surveys and interviews) included the opinions or perception of supporters such as superintendents, local banker or school board members. Although supporter perceptions are important, a critical voice (the taxpayer) is missing. It is more difficult to engage and collect data from district stakeholders who are not employees of the district, or those that do not have children attending district schools. None-the-less, these stakeholders are critical to the success of the bond referendum. Future research should include the analysis of factors that determine stakeholder

engagement. As noted earlier, it was difficult to engage stakeholder in this study. The question is why? Perhaps additional research on stakeholder engagement would be beneficial.

3. The consolidation process in rural school district in Kansas was difficult for all. Towns lost their school. Rivals, who once opposed each other, were now attending the same school and competing as teammates. The longitudinal study of lingering effects on school district consolidation towards district moral and support of school bond referendums is warranted.

### **Impact of the Research Study on the Scholar-Practitioner**

Learning to become an investigative researcher is an evolving process. My initial years as an educator involved monitoring individual student data in my classroom to determine strategies that could help them grow. Later, as a building principal, my focus expanded to a building-wide focus encompassing four grade levels. This research was much broader and required monitoring multiple data sets. In the past four years, the combination of my job responsibilities as a district administrator, in concert with my course work at the University of Arkansas has taught me to analyze a variety of data, which impacts an entire school system.

The University of Arkansas doctoral program has taught me how to plan and implement a research design that is applicable to my research questions. It has taught me to critically evaluate the data from this research, and form viable recommendations that are both unbiased and informed by the collected data. Initially, I was not a fan of collecting and evaluating qualitative data. Due to time commitment, qualitative data analysis can create a degree of impatience for this researcher. However, as I started to see various themes emerge from the qualitative data and observed how those themes were converging or diverging with other data sets, I became excited.

The biggest challenges related to this study were collecting my thoughts in a fluid and understandable fashion so I could accurately communicate the research findings. The collection of quantitative and qualitative data for this mixed-methods study was time consuming yet in retrospect, incredibly valuable in understanding the perceptions of DVSD stakeholders.

By the conclusion of this study, my comfort level on collecting quantitative and qualitative data grew exponentially and these research skills will transfer to my career as a public school administrator. Just as important, I have significantly improved my understanding of the Problem of Practice I sought answer for and the path of resolution necessary for my current school district and potentially others!



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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A – Survey**

All residents of voting age in the Delaware Valley School District will be provided the opportunity to complete this survey. The purpose of this survey is to collect perceptual data to understand participant perceptions regarding tax increases that support school district initiatives and voter contentment of communication strategies utilized by the school district. Collected data will determine if there are any demographic trends with voters associated with the chosen profession or age range. The overall goal will be to collect 1/3 of the eligible voting population due to low voter apathy in school bond elections.

#### **Stakeholder Survey (Survey Monkey)**

- 1) Which buildings do your children attend? Check all that apply?
  - a. Delaware Valley High School
  - b. Delaware Valley Middle School
  - c. Delaware Valley Elementary School
  - d. Delaware Valley Primary School
  - e. No children attending school
  
- 2) Which job most closely matches your current employment?
  - a. Corporate (business world)
  - b. Industry (plant/machine operators, assemblers)
  - c. Management (business, hospitality)
  - d. A small business located within DVSD district
  - e. A small business located outside DVSD district
  - f. Sales



- g. Service
- h. Agriculture/Rancher
- i. Medical
- j. Education
- k. Military
- l. Currently unemployed
- m. Retired

3) How long have you lived in the DVSD school district?

- a. 0-10 years
- b. 11-20 years
- c. 21-30 years
- d. 31-40 years
- e. More than 40 years

4) What is your age range?

- a. 18-29
- b. 30-39
- c. 40-49
- d. 50-59
- e. 60-69
- f. 70-79
- g. 80 or older

Question: The following statements will help the researcher better understand participant perceptions and understandings of the demands facing the Delaware Valley school district.

5) School district administrators communicate the current needs of the school district.

SA    A    N    D    SD

6) The school district communicates the future needs of the school district.

SA    A    N    D    SD

7) The current facilities are adequate for the students of DVSD.

SA    A    N    D    SD

8) In terms of future plans for the school district, I feel community members need to be more involved with the planning process.

SA    A    N    D    SD

9) I trust the school district to spend taxpayer money appropriately.

SA    A    N    D    SD

10) I trust the decisions made by school district officials represent the best interests of our students and community.

SA    A    N    D    SD

11) I am aware of the recent potential growth developments occurring in the southeast corner of the Delaware Valley School District boundary and how it could potentially impact the DVSC.

SA    A    N    D    SD

12) I understand the potential impact the proposed housing developments near the division one university athletic complex could have on district student enrollment numbers.

SA    A    N    D    SD

13) I feel adequate information was provided about the August 2019 recreation commission vote.

SA    A    N    D    SD

14) I feel there was adequate community feedback gathered about the need for a recreation commission.

SA    A    N    D    SD

15) I feel the school district communicated an acceptable reason for why the recreation commission was needed.

SA    A    N    D    SD

16) Do you have any concerns or issues with past school bond elections in the DVSC?

17) Are there any factors/issues you feel the school district should consider before proceeding with a bond referendum?

18) Do you have any suggestions on how the school district should communicate the need or rationale for new facilities?

19) Would you share what you believe is an appropriate limit on property taxes paid to the DVSD? Please elaborate on why you feel this way?

20) TBD with committee guidance. Perhaps I am missing a question that would be relevant to this study.

## Appendix B - Interview Protocols

Criteria and stratified sampling will determine the participants of the community focus groups. Additionally, the district site council will be utilized as a fifth focus group due to their volunteer involvement in helping the school district make decisions. Interview questions will assist with confirmation of previously collected quantitative data but will also support a further and deeper understanding of stakeholder perceptions regarding tax increases that support Delaware Valley School District initiatives. Tentative follow up questions are included, but could change based on survey results. Bulleted following questions are provided.

- 1) Do you feel good about the reputation of the Delaware Valley School District?
  - Are you able to provide examples?
- 2) What concerns do you have about the DVSD?
  - How do you feel this should have been handled?
- 3) What can you tell me about potential growth/housing developments in the DVSD?
  - Do you have concerns about the impact of growth on the DVSD?
- 4) For stakeholders of the DVSD who voted no on the 2019 recreation commission, please share what you believe influence the opposition to vote?
  - Do any of you believe there might have been something the school district or supporters could have done differently that might have changed the opposition's vote?
  - Was there a moment in time that you knew a community member who originally planned to support the recreation commission, but later changed their mind to a no vote? If so, can you share why you believe their mindset changed?
- 5) If the school district proposed a bond referendum for a new school building/facility, what concerns do you have about supporting this decision?
  - What are the reasons that would cause you to vote yes?
  - What are the reasons that might cause you to vote no?
- 6) Please share different methods or strategies that you believe the school district should use to communicate the rationale for increased taxes associated with a bond referendum?

- Are there strategies/promotional activities do you feel the school district avoid?
- 7) What can the school district do differently to better communicate school district needs?
- Can you provide more specific examples of when or how the school district failed to communicate appropriately?
  - How would you prefer to receive communication from the school district regarding needs?
- 8) Do you have concerns about the future facility demands of the Delaware Valley School District? If so, please share.
- How do you believe the school district should deal with these issues?

### Appendix C – Millage Impact Sheet (2004 DVSD School Bond Proposal)

DVSD School Bond Proposal Tax Examples								
	CAV	A%	Av	EML	IATI	MBR	NTI	MNI
House	\$100,000	11.5%	\$11,500	9.9 mils	\$113.85	\$62.95	\$51	\$4.24
House	\$150,000	11.5%	\$17,250	9.9 mils	\$170.78	\$94.43	\$76	\$6.36
House	\$250,000	11.5%	\$28,750	9.9 mils	\$284.63	\$157.38	\$127	\$10.60
100 AP	\$7,000	30.0%	\$2,100	9.9 mils	\$20.79	\$11.50	\$9	\$0.77
100 AT	\$20,000	30.0%	\$6,000	9.9 mils	\$59.40	\$32.84	\$27	\$2.21
100 AP	\$10,000	30.0%	\$3,000	9.9 mils	\$29.70	\$16.42	\$13	\$1.11
100 AT	\$15,000	30.0%	\$4,500	9.9 mils	\$44.55	\$24.63	\$20	\$1.66

Note: Recreated from spreadsheet used in DVSD 2004 successful bond referendum.

*Key:*

*CAV – County Appraised Value*

*AP – Assessment Percentage*

*AV – Assessed Value*

*EML – Estimated Maximum Levy for new bonds*

*IATI - Initial Annual Tax Increase*

*MBR - Minus 5.474 mils for bonds retiring Sept 1, 2008.*

*NTI - Net Tax Increase after Sept 1, 2008*

*MNI- Monthly Net Increase*

## Appendix D - Research Steps



## Appendix E – Focus Group Interview Consent Form

### Consent Form

University of Arkansas/Educational Leadership

Dear USD 343 Stakeholder,

My name is Josh Woodward. I am a graduate student at the University of Arkansas in pursuit of the degree of Doctoral of Educational Leadership. Part of the requirements for this program is that I complete a research dissertation study. Your interest in participating in the focus group interviews is appreciated. Thank you for providing your email address at the end of the online survey alerting me to your interest in participating.

The purpose of this research is determine factors that influence the success of bond referendum in a rural Kansas school district. In order to gain data for this study, I am in search of school district stakeholders who are eligible to vote. I would like to invite you to join a focus group of school district stakeholders eligible to vote in an election. Findings from this study will be presented as part of a dissertation defense at the University of Arkansas.

Before agreeing to participate, I understand that:

- The focus group interview will occur via online Zoom meeting. The principal investigator (Josh Woodward) will send me the Zoom link after I have submitted my consent form.
- My responses to questions asked in this interview will be kept strictly confidential and used only for the purpose of this study. To maintain confidential of all participants, the researcher will follow the guidelines of the institutional review board of the University of Arkansas. The recording will remain confidential to the extent of the law and the University of Arkansas policy.
- The focus group interview will be recorded for use in this study. The information collected will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. Once transcripts of each recording are complete and accuracy of transcription confirmed, the recordings will be deleted from the Zoom account but copies of the recording will be stored on a password protected Google Drive account for a minimum of three years past the completion of the study, per state and federal regulations. No participant will be identified in any publications or reports resulting from this research. Participants will be identified by numbers (Ex. Participant #1) if feedback from interview is used for publications or research reports.
- The focus group interview will include 8 open-ended questions with some potential follow up questions. My participation in this study will take approximately one hour.
- My participation is voluntary, and I have the right to discontinue my participation at any moment by exiting the zoom meeting.
- At the conclusion of the focus group interview, each participant will be offered the opportunity to schedule a one-on-one interview with the researcher. If requested, all



protocols and procedures for the focus group interview will be followed for the one-on-one interview.

The information provided in this survey will help me in my endeavor to determine influences that affect bond referendum elections in a rural Kansas school district. I sincerely thank you for your time and honest answers.

All survey participants who agree to participate in the focus group interviews will be eligible for one \$100 Amazon gift card drawing. Additionally, one \$50 Amazon gift card drawing will occur for each of the five focus group interviews.

Should you have any questions about this research, appropriate contact information is listed below.

With highest regards,

Josh Woodward	Dr. Kevin P. Brady
Principal Investigator	Co-Investigator
jmwoodwa@uark.edu	kpbrady@uark.edu

Print and sign your name below to verify that you are 18 years or older and eligible to vote, you reside within the Perry Lecompton school district boundary lines, you have read and understand your rights, and that you consent to participate in this research study via an online Zoom meeting.

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Print Name

---

Signature

---

Date

## Appendix F – Focus Group Interview Questions

Eight initial questions, followed by possible follow up questions to clarify or ask participant to expand or elaborate on response.

- 1) Please share your thoughts about the reputation of the Delaware Valley School District?
- 2) How would you evaluate the ability of the Delaware Valley School District to communicate current and further needs of the school district?
- 3) In regards to the school district's communication strategies, how would you prefer to receive communication from the school district regarding current and future needs?
- 4) As recent as August of 2019, the Perry Lecompton school district sought stakeholder support to increase one mill to fund a recreation commission. This proposal was rejected by 65% of the voters. Please share why you believe this proposed recreation commission was voted down by stakeholders in the Perry Lecompton School District?
- 5) If you were asked to explain the potential concerns with enrollment growth within the Perry Lecompton school district to a stranger, what would say?
- 6) If the school district was considering a bond referendum for a new school building or facility, how should the district go about determining the need and moving forward? In other words, what are important consideration for the school district to make when planning for the proposal BEFORE submitting to voters?
- 7) What are two or three important considerations or strategies the school district must follow if it hopes to convince voters of the need or rationale to pass a bond referendum to build new facilities?
- 8) How would you suggest the school district address rumors that may arise during a bond campaign or through social media.

That concludes this focus group interview.

Thank you very much for participating in my study and should you feel the need to participate in a one-on-one interview to further explain your opinions or response, please contact me.

## Appendix G – IRB Approval




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**To:** Josh Woodward  
**From:** Douglas James Adams, Chair  
 IRB Expedited Review  
**Date:** 09/23/2020  
**Action:** **Expedited Approval**  
**Action Date:** 09/23/2020  
**Protocol #:** 2004263930A003  
**Study Title:** Factors Influencing Stakeholder Support of a Bond Referendum in a Rural Kansas School District  
**Expiration Date:** 05/19/2021  
**Last Approval Date:** 09/23/2020

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

**Adverse Events:** Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Kevin P Brady, Investigator