

STRATEGIES AND FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PASSING SCHOOL REFERENDUMS

IN INDIANA

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**ABSTRACT**

**DISSERTATION:** Strategies and Factors Contributing to Passing School Referendums in Indiana

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Indiana School Leaders are sometimes forced to search beyond the traditional funding sources provided by the state. Proposing a school referendum to local voters is one avenue that school districts can utilize in order to add additional revenue for operating expenditures or when growth dictates the building of new buildings or major renovations to current structures. This study provided an examination of strategies and variables contributing to the passing of school referendums in Indiana. This study examined various quantitative variables and what statistical relationships existed in relation to majority passing rates of school referendums in Indiana. Additionally, this study examined qualitative insights from current and former Indiana School Superintendents in relation to referendum campaign strategies. Data sources of the study included longitudinal data from the Center for Education and Evaluation Policy (CEEP), Indiana Census data of 2010, Indiana Department of Education School District data, and superintendent survey data. Correlation and regression models were conducted to analyze if there were any statistical relationships of nineteen independent variables associated with school referendums with referendum passing rates from the years 2008-2019. Variables were isolated into three sectors: School, Referendum and Community and multiple regression models were utilized

among and between these three sectors. Additionally, a fourth sector of political factors was observed throughout the duration of the study.

Of the nineteen variables tested, seven variables were found to have a significant relationship with the dependent variable passing rate. Regression analysis identified the percentage of college graduates living in a community as the strongest statistical relationship. Additionally, other variables including the tax rate of the proposed referendum, the enrollment of the district, the median housing value of the district, the median age of the district, the percentage of English Language Learners in the district, and the total population of the district were as statistically significant in correlation studies. Variables including the timing of the referendum, the total amount of the project, and several other variables showed significant relationships when observed in isolated analyses. This study also drew upon qualitative data from four local school superintendents to provide further insights and strategies for school districts seeking to propose a referendum. Specific insights on the referendum campaign, political factors and other strategies that they found paramount to a successful referendum process was also explored.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Periodically, U.S school districts request money from the voters in their local school to build new or upgrade existing school facilities. Traditionally, public school districts finance the construction of new school facilities or renovations to current facilities through voter-approved local school bond elections in which the school district proposes to issue a certain amount of long-term debt to fund the near-term construction of new schools, facilities, and renovations (Bowers & Lee, 2013). Funds to pay for capital-improvement projects are usually raised through school bonds, borrowing money that is paid back at interest over time with increased local property taxes approved by voters (Bowers et al., 2010).

Interestingly, a fairly large amount of research on the factors most associated with passing or failing a school bond referendum vote was conducted in the United States during the 1960s and early 1970s as the “baby boomer” generation matriculated through the public-school system and districts needed to accommodate rapid growth and demographic shifts in their communities (Bowers & Lee, 2013). Districts that cannot secure funding from their voters for up-to-date capital improvements may fall behind more successful neighboring districts in providing quality teaching and learning conditions (Bowers et al., 2010). According to Cash and Twiford (2009), over 60 years of research continues to support the positive relationship between the quality of school buildings and student achievement. A study of school building condition, attendance, and academic achievement in New York City found building conditions to be a predictor of student attendance and student achievement on standardized tests (Cash & Twiford, 2009). Crampton and Thompson (2008) explained that if citizens expect school staff to perform at their best, they also expect school buildings to meet the highest standards of facility

excellence. This can be particularly troublesome as high-stakes accountability puts school districts in a results-driven race and school-choice competition empowers families to move their students into nearby districts that are performing better on standardized assessments or other accountability measures.

In the United States, the most common way of financing capital improvement programs is through tax levies or the sale of bonds. School districts periodically must seek voter support by asking them to authorize the school district to borrow money which is repaid over a determined amount of years through taxes (Holt, 2006; Bondo, 2010). According to Dolph (2006), “school levies and bond issues have dramatically increased across the country. State funding formulas that limit inflationary growth in revenue, more mandates that require additional resources, and changes in tax laws all contribute to the growing phenomenon” (p.1). Holt et al. (2006) explained that property taxes are not as vulnerable to cuts in recessionary times as state funding tends to be. Dolph (2006) further delineated that more school districts are asking voters for financial support through the referendum or levy process which is forcing school officials to look at a variety of approaches and techniques for increasing the likelihood that voters approve school funding measures.

Additionally, many school districts in Indiana find themselves asking voters to approve general fund referendums more often than building construction referendums. Since 2008, Indiana has seen 198 school referendums placed on voter ballots with 120 general fund referendums and 77 construction referendums. There was one additional debt refinancing referendum (CEEP, 2019). School districts seeking general fund referendums traditionally put forth a certain dollar amount desired or the purposes of supplementing the general fund of the school district. In Indiana, 92% of the general fund is allocated by state dollars (CEEP, 2016).

Regardless of the type of referendum or the proposed tax increase, school officials know that school referendums are never popular with the general public. Many factors go into the need for school referendum but appropriately communicating these needs to the voters requires a delicate balancing act by the school district. School districts seeking additional funds must consider variables that illustrate the need, including overcrowding or substantial growth, high student-to-teacher ratios, or high maintenance and renovation costs. Voters are also more likely to support referendum efforts from which they stand to benefit directly (Hanover Research, 2012). Districts need to consider ways to increase the number of beneficiaries of the referendum. Examples may include allowing community organizations to access proposed new school buildings outside of school hours or allowing public access to newly constructed gymnasiums or athletic fields (Hanover Research, 2012).

However, the likelihood of passage of a school referendum is far from certain. Wirt and Kirst (1997) noted that passage of bond elections declined from 75% in 1960 to 35% in 1989 as poor economic conditions fueled the struggle to win support for referendum efforts (Hanover Research, 2012). Tosto (2009) explained that as the population ages, retires, and more people begin to rely on fixed incomes, it becomes easier for those who do not have children at home to vote against school-related tax increases. More recent analyses, including information from the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) in Indiana (2016), showed that 62.6 % of all general fund and construction referenda have passed since 2008. The unpopularity of tax increases forces school boards to seek strategies to secure the approval of school district referendums (Dolph, 2006).

School districts also face the public scrutiny from voters as a byproduct of a perceived lack of trust and communication. Holt et al. (2006) explained that voters have can have negative

feelings toward school referendums because of higher taxes, feelings about past attempts to pass referendums, and an overall lack of trust in the leadership of the school district. These issues influence a school district's ability to pass a school referendum by winning the support of the majority of the community.

However, state and district norms have shown that school passage rates can vary depending on the amount and types of variables involved in the referenda project as well as the strategies utilized by school districts to gain voter support. In 2010, Indiana placed 16 school referendums to voters which spread over various parts of the state and represented diverse communities in Indiana. Of these 16 referendums only eight, or 50% of them, passed due to multiple reasons including timing, cost, and local community factors. In 2018, however, 20 of 24 referendums passed in May and November. Recent data has been trending upward for school districts in Indiana, indicating schools may have become more cognizant of factors that improve likelihood of referendum passage such as the timing of the referendums or adjusting the cost of the projects to have less impact on tax rates. Since broad conclusions about factors that contribute to the success or failure of a referendum are difficult to make, selective input and testimony from superintendents who led these efforts is important in understanding potential reasons for success or failure of school referendums (Hiller & Spradlin, 2011). In the majority of approved referendums over the last nine years, superintendents commented on the organized community effort to educate the public on the need for the referendum. Kraus (2009) shared in a dissertation on factors that influence the success or failure of referendums that "nothing will bring about the failure of a school bond election more quickly than the lack of clear, on-going communication about the identified needs or the perception that school officials are not communicating honestly with patrons" (p. 27). Further, the need to begin campaigning sooner to

get more facts out to the public follows this line of thought and suggests that proceeding this way could possibly lead to a more favorable result (Hiller & Spradlin, 2011).

Educating future voters and creating stronger lines of communication are also variables that have been identified as reasonable methods for gaining voter support (Hiller & Spradlin, 2011). Additionally, economic conditions appear to play a significant role in school referendums. Coinciding with economic conditions, voters in 2011 in Indiana seemed to favor referendums which increased taxes to a lesser degree and thus cost individual taxpayers less (Hiller & Spradlin, 2011). Average tax increases for referenda that were passed were 0.03% lower than those that were defeated.

School referendums are a complex entity that school districts must carefully consider before attempting to ask for voter approval for increased taxes. In addition to current economic conditions, perceived opposition to taxes in general, and other negative factors associated with school referendums, one key aspect identified by nearly all superintendents was the uprising of formal opposition by an outside task force or group of community members. Nearly all school districts shared that misinformation campaigns and formal opposition had some impact on the success or failure of the proposed referendums. Interestingly, only half of these districts engaged in some type of clarification message through newsletters or other forms of mass media (Spradlin & Hiller, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (2019), there have been 198 attempted school referendums in Indiana since 2008. These were a combination of general-fund referendums, in which the goal was to provide local tax money to the general fund of the school district for a set number of years, and construction referendums, in which new buildings or

projects would be constructed and financed through increased local property taxes. In Indiana, the structure for how schools are financed has changed dramatically in the last decade with nearly 90% of the general fund being allocated by the State of Indiana on a per pupil basis. Additionally, the referendum process for school construction projects changed dramatically such that school districts must place projects of a certain value to the local voting body for passage. Schools must go through this in a standard election process and gain a majority of votes to enact such referendum proposals.

School leaders are now forced to utilize campaign processes that create community support for referendum projects. School districts have experienced mild success with referendums since the onset in 2008; however due to multiple variables at the local level, school leaders are still in a flux to accurately predict if school referendum efforts will be successful. The raising of taxes on any level is never a popular strategy. However, school districts are finding ways to increase the likelihood of referendum success by educating community members, by involving them early in the process, and by creating task forces comprised of a diverse group of citizens. Because many school administrators were not aware of the factors and strategies that may influence voters nor the variables that contribute to passing referendums, nearly half of all school referendums have failed (Holt, 2002). Due to the limited examples and the unique nature of the needs for each district's referendum, many school administrators are not experienced with the referendum process and lack knowledge of which variables produce the best opportunity for passing referendums. Indiana has fared better than most states but still has passed only 68.3% of general referendums and 53.2% of construction referendums (CEEP, 2019).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand what variables and factors are associated with the rates of passing or failing of referendums in Indiana school districts. This study investigated multiple variables and calculations that had been collected by CEEP in a database of Indiana School Referenda over the last ten years. Additionally, this study attempted to understand the methods school districts enact to ascertain the primary and secondary factors associated with the passage or failure of a school referendum. The study investigated the positive and negative variables associated with school districts that successfully passed school referendums versus those that failed.

A secondary purpose of this descriptive study was to understand the effectiveness of factors and strategies surrounding the passage of a school referendum in the state of Indiana. Each state in the United States has unique laws that outline the procedural measures school districts must enact to begin the referendum process. Indiana is one of 14 states in the United States that does not use state funding for school construction projects thus leaving this burden to the local taxpayer through capital project and debt financing. Until 2017, school construction projects in Indiana fell under a dual system of approval. Elementary school projects under \$10 million, high school projects under \$20 million, and other projects under \$12 million fell under the petition and remonstrance process, whereas projects exceeding those limits were subject to school construction referenda (CEEP, 2011). Since 2017, new factors including the Assessed Valuation of a district and the Assessed Valuation Growth Quotient have altered this process. Districts now are able to raise referendum rates based on positive assessed valuation.

School districts in the United States face challenging financial concerns each fiscal year in regard to the associated costs with school construction and school finances. Bowers et al.

(2010) explained, “Understanding why bond requests are passed or rejected is an urgent issue for school district leaders, local communities, and educational researchers” (p. 376). In the state of Indiana, there have been 198 referenda placed before voters. One hundred twenty of these referenda have been general fund and 77 have been for construction, with one for debt financing. In sum, 124 (62.6%) total referenda have passed. General fund referenda have passed at a rate of 68.3%, with construction referenda passing at a rate of 53.2% (CEEP, 2019). Unfortunately, for school leaders in Indiana, the referendum process has been nearly a 60/40 proposition and a risky one at that. Adding to the challenge is that research and data on the referendum process in Indiana is still within the first decade of review, as changes in policy were not enacted until 2008. Empirical data in Indiana on the trends as well as strategies for passing a school referendum simply are not plentiful and information supporting successful strategies is still an area of ambiguity.

### **Research Questions**

These research questions were designed to expand upon previous works by researchers who identified strategies and factors for successful passage of school referendums. They also aimed to provide school districts in Indiana empirical and historical data as well as testimonial data by school and committee officials for successful strategies and variables that attributed to referendum success. This data, along with qualitative data from school superintendents, was analyzed and compared to current historical data as provided by the CEEP to attempt to determine trends and a rationale for successful school referendums in Indiana.

1. Based upon data from the 2019 CEEP database, what factors and variables have the strongest statistical relationship to referendum passage or failure rates?

2. In school districts that passed or failed referendums in Indiana, what primary strategies did superintendents perceive as the most influential and critical for success or failure? What internal political, social, and demographic factors do superintendents in Indiana determine as significant for successful referendums?

### **Delimitations of the Study**

Several limitations existed in the study and needed to be taken into consideration when the results were analyzed. One quantitative limitation was that only historical data from 2008 until 2019 was utilized, and only those schools identified as going through a referendum since 2008 were involved in the study. Another quantitative limitation was that since the census data was taken from the last available United States Census in 2010, percentages and data were not the most recent; therefore, data projections, although proportional, could be different.

Additionally, the timing of the referendums and the timing of the changes to referendum thresholds were not congruent. School districts that attempted to build new schools before the procedural changes on referendums had a different set of criteria to overcome that may have influenced decisions leading up to the referendum.

Qualitative limitations included research was only conducted at a limited number of school districts across the state of Indiana. Ideally more districts and personnel from the districts who had intimate knowledge of the referendum campaign would have been interviewed. For purposes of listing strategies for successful referendums, demographic variances, race, SES, and ethnicity were not considered in the first two research questions of the study. This included the number of senior citizens residing in a community as well as the percentage of staff members with children in the school corporation as compared to the general population. Finally, the timing

of the survey was varied for many superintendents. Some superintendents were interviewed several years after the school referendum proposal, or they now worked in a different position.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Diffusion theory undergirds this study. The diffusion theory of Nutley et al. (2002) showed how evidence and ideas from a wide range of underpinning disciplines are drawn together. These disciplines include anthropology, education, geography, and sociology. These underpinning disciplines provide a range of perspectives on the diffusion of innovations. For the purposes of this study, the term “innovation” was used to refer to the decision of a school district to pursue a school referendum.

According to Rogers (2003), diffusion theories originated from the adoption of technological change by farmers. Since then, the scope of diffusion theories and associated empirical research has broadened. While diffusion literature largely covers innovations in industrial and service settings, a good deal of attention has now also been paid to public service and public policy innovations, with considerable emphasis on the diffusion of innovations in the health care and educational fields (Nutley & Davies, 2000). Rogers (2003) defines diffusion as “the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (p. 5).

Rogers (2003) pointed out that diffusion is not a single, all-encompassing theory. It is several theoretical perspectives that relate to the overall concept of diffusion; it is a meta-theory (Yates, 2001). There are four factors that influence adoption of an innovation (Rogers, 2003) they include:

- the innovation itself
- the communication channels used to spread information about the innovation

- time, and
- the nature of the society to whom it is introduced.

The innovation stage sets forth a description of the innovation. “An innovation is an idea, practice or project that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (Rogers, 2003, p. 12). One of the important obstacles of innovation is uncertainty. Rogers (2003) described uncertainty as a consequences-of-innovation and “are the changes that occur in an individual or a social system as a result of the innovation or rejection of the innovation (p. 436). Rogers further stated, “individuals should be informed about its advantages and disadvantages to make them aware of all its consequences” (p. 437). Communication channels are the second element of the diffusion model of innovation. This factor is focused on the process in which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding. This communication can occur in multiple ways including mass media and interpersonal communications. Interpersonal channels are more powerful as they create strong attitudes held by one individual that are conveyed to another individual (Rogers, 2003). Time is a third factor, and according to Rogers (2003), the time aspect is ignored in most behavioral research. The time dimension is one of the strengths of the diffusion model. Finally, the social system is the last element in the diffusion process. This is defined as the set of interrelated units engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal (Rogers, 2003).

Rogers (2003) explained that there are four major theories that deal with the diffusion of innovations. The innovation-decision process was the theory utilized for this study (See Figure 1). The innovation-decision process theory is based on time and five distinct stages (Nutley et al., 2002). Rogers (2003) described the innovation-decision process as “an information-seeking and information-processing activity, where an individual is motivated to reduce uncertainty

about the advantages and disadvantages of an innovation” (p. 172). The first stage is knowledge. Potential adopters must first learn about the innovation and seek information about the innovation. This stage includes the what, how, and why questions asked by individuals as they attempt to determine what the innovation is and how and why it works (Rogers, 2003). This stage has three subsets of knowledge including awareness-knowledge, how-to-knowledge, and principles-knowledge. Awareness-knowledge represents basic understanding of the innovation. How-to-knowledge focuses on how individuals can use the knowledge of the innovation correctly; whereas principles-knowledge is the type of knowledge that is functional and allows the individual to use the knowledge proficiently.

Second is the persuasion stage when individuals must be persuaded as to the merits of the innovation. Individuals develop a negative or positive attitude toward the innovation, although their attitude does not always lead directly or indirectly to an adoption or rejection (Rogers, 2003). The persuasion stage is more affective-centered, and individuals are more likely to be influenced by social reinforcement by others, including peers and colleagues.

The decision stage in the innovation-decision process occurs when the individual chooses to adopt or reject the innovation. For this stage, adoption refers to “full use of an innovation as the best course of action available” (Rogers, 2003, p. 177). The fourth stage, implementation, is when individuals put the innovation into practice. This stage includes a separate important stage called reinvention, which refers to “the degree to which an innovation is changed or modified by a user in the process of its adoption and implementation” (Rogers, 2003, p. 180).

The final stage of the innovative-decision process is the confirmation stage. At this stage the innovative-decision has been made and the individuals look for support for the decision. Individuals can reverse their decision if they are exposed to conflicting messages about the

innovation. Attitudes are crucial at this stage. Individuals tend to seek supporting messages that confirm their decision. Two types of discontinuance can occur in the confirmation stage. The first type, replacement discontinuance, occurs if the individual rejects the innovation to adopt a different or better innovation. The second, disenchantment discontinuance, occurs if the individual is not satisfied with the performance. Diffusion results once these stages are achieved (Rogers, 2003).

For the purpose of this study, I looked at the five stages that adopters (i.e., voters) may go through in the referendum process. As shared previously, educating the community and voters at large is a customary first step. Voters need to gain knowledge on the school referendum process as well as the associated specifics of the need for the project. This may come in various forms including community events, media, and discussion with more informed members of the community. Voters tend to be curious about the specifics of the referendum, the reasons why it is needed, and what impact it may have on them as community members and taxpayers. During the second step, school districts must adequately sell the need and rationale for the school referendum. School districts typically share that the referendum would improve the rate of teacher retention and would ensure that useful educational programs would not be lost, as could happen in the event of a failed referendum. Additionally, building upkeep and the possibility of constructing new facilities require support from taxpayers. This also would include the necessary communication and discussion about the specifics of the referendum including cost, need, and timing. It is paramount that school districts use both forms of communication in the persuasion stage as most voters will be equally if not more influenced by their peers, neighbors, and people they trust than simple ads or commercials. This stage allows for referendum supporters and

originators to focus not only on the cognitive aspects of the innovation but also on the affective factors that most voters use when determining to give support or to reject.

Once in the third step, school districts must “get out the vote” and solicit constituents to vote in favor of the school referendum. In the decision stage, voters choose to either support or reject the referendum by voting and not just in thought or feelings. Voters decide if this is the best course of action and the most efficacious decision concerning the local school district and the students who attend.

The fourth step, implementation, is critical for school districts for several reasons. First, most individuals, especially those who were against or wavering need to see execution and implementation exactly how it was portrayed. Second, school districts are held to very strict measures on meeting the specifics of the proposals, and minimal adaptations and changes are allowed. School officials must implement the proposals as planned and with consistent measures while continually communicating stages of work and benchmarks of the proposed projects.

Confirmation is the final step. Although somewhat subjective at the individual level, confirmation is met by observing how the current project has been accepted and if the decision has reached a point of institutional acceptance. Voters reach diffusion after proposed changes have been confirmed by voter acceptance, with the possibility of a ratification for new school referendum projects in the future. Discontinuance for the referendum and its associated factors ultimately need to be at a minimum in the minority opinion. (See Figure One)

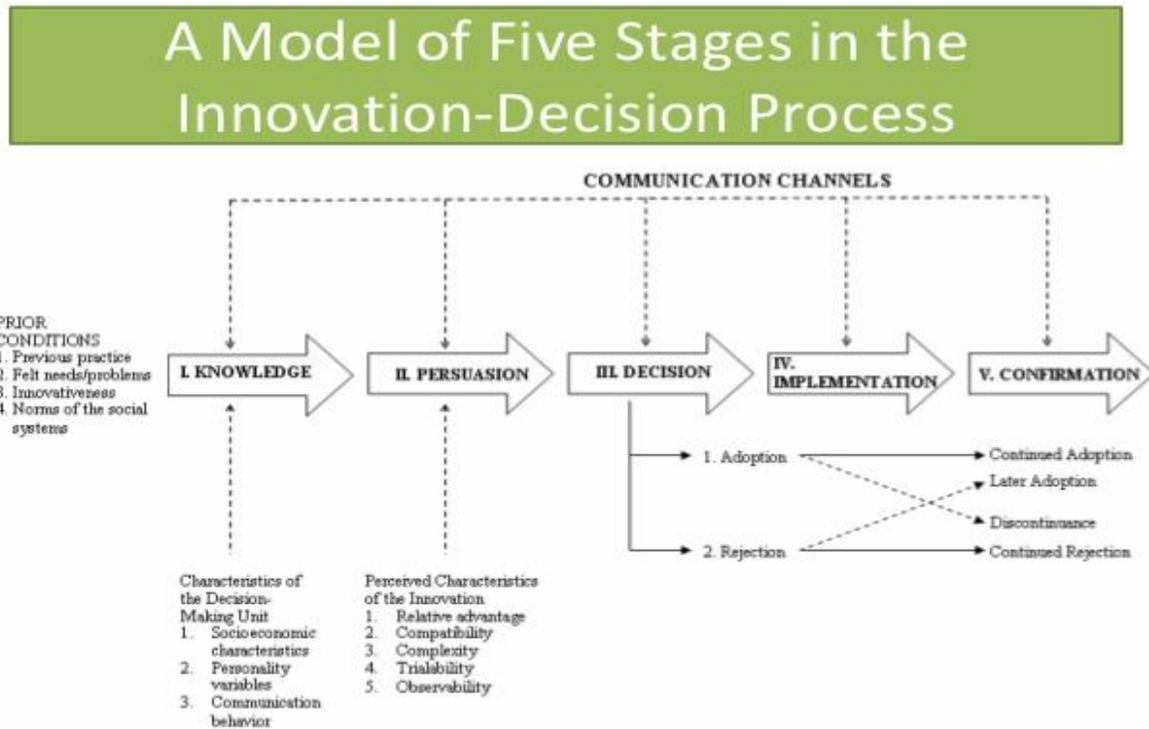


Figure 1: Five Stages in the decision innovation process (Nutley et al., 2002).

### Significance of the Study

Research by Hanover Research and works by Johnson and Ingle (2008) and Holt et al. (2006) provide a cornerstone and foundation for this study to provide further insight into the factors associated with passing a school referendum as well as the strategies that improve the likelihood that a school district will succeed in their referendum efforts. As a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, state accountability measures, and now Every Student Succeeds Act, the pressure for improved student achievement continues to leave school administrators in a quandary. School leaders are forced to decide how the school corporation will address its needs while spending money in the most appropriate places. This can force superintendents to address critical facility needs while focusing on staffing and educational programs. This duology creates

an atmosphere in which school leaders must appropriately plan for changes in funding formulas and mandates by education officials at the state and federal level.

The results of this research further enable the leaders of public-school districts to understand some of the many variables, factors, and strategies associated with successful school referendum campaigns. This research informs school leaders on identifying and re-enacting previously successful referendum strategies while also avoiding those which proved to be unsuccessful. Finally, this study provides school leaders with historical knowledge about the trends regarding school referendums including percentage rates of various locales and demographics in Indiana. Study findings could contribute to the limited body of knowledge currently available about school referendums in Indiana as well as provide both quantitative and qualitative research on the topic.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

For each of the following definitions, the reader is advised that the definitions are meant to specifically define the terms as used in this study and referring to referendum policy in the state of Indiana.

***CEEP.*** The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy

***Community Factors.*** These factors were variables taken from the 2010 Census that most closely aligned with the demographics of the community in which the school district resides

***Construction Referendum.*** Type of referendum in which a school district makes public notice of its intention to issue bonds or enter a lease for a construction project which can increase property taxes of local taxpayers (Hiller & Spradlin, 2011)

***General Fund Referendum.*** This type of referendum is put forth when a school district determines it cannot carry on its mission and “public education duty” without the added revenue

from an additional levy; it may also be put forth when the school district needs to replace revenue lost because of property tax caps (Hiller & Spradlin, 2011)

**Locale.** The locale is defined by characterizing a specific school district in a category of urban, suburban, town, or rural community

**Referenda.** It is synonymous with referendum

**Referendum.** Referendums are defined as the general term associated with a school district's initiative to raise or add tax levies or bond issues to the general public

**Referendum Campaign.** The term campaign is defined as the time period a school district sets forth its proposal to voters and it is voted on in by a public election

**Referendum Factors.** These factors are variables most closely associated with the specifics of the referendum proposal including cost, type, and timing

**School Factors.** These factors are variables that most closely aligned with a school's academic and demographic data

**Task Force.** A task force is defined as a group comprised of diverse community members, including school personnel and community members at large

**Tax rate.** The rate that homeowners are charged on property taxes on their assessed valuation of their property

### **Summary**

The future of school referendums in Indiana will continue to rely heavily on a district's ability to communicate the needs of the district as well as convince voters of the need for the referendum. School leaders are faced with many important educational decisions each year and must balance the needs of the district with the ability to properly function under the current

revenue it is allotted. Tax caps, a continued scrutiny over taxes and a general mistrust of school officials are barriers that school leaders face when attempting to pass a general or construction referendum for the district. According to Ingle et al. (2009), school districts need to engage community members across multiple stakeholder groups and create a sense of urgency to have success in referendum elections. Some common strategies are available for use by all districts in running their referendum campaign; however, the process of deciding how they can best be utilized and integrated into the community is unique to each district. Successful passage of school referendums relies on a complex set of entities that school leaders must implement to provide the strongest opportunity of success. The factors and strategies identified by Fairbank (2006), Johnson and Ingle (2008), and Holt et al. (2006) served as a general template for the survey instrument as well as the qualitative interviews of various districts. Finally, historical data provided by CEEP (2018) allowed for analysis of survey data as compared to referendum data gathered since 2008 in Indiana.

In Chapter Two, a review of the literature related to school referendums and their associated strategies and factors is presented. Chapter Three discusses the method and research design of the study. Chapters Four and Five provide an analysis of the survey data, a summary of the findings, and finally, implications for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

It has become commonplace for traditional public schools to seek referendums to upgrade or build new facilities as well as to increase operating budgets. Educational researchers have studied the relationships between school achievement and school funding and school facilities for over four decades. Duran-Narucki's 2008 study of school building condition, attendance, and academic achievement in New York City found building conditions to be a predictor of student attendance and student achievement on standardized tests (Cash & Twiford, 2009). Crampton and Thompson (2008) explained that if society expects school staff to perform at their best, we must expect school buildings meet the highest standards of facility excellence. This can be particularly troublesome as high-stakes accountability measures put school districts in a results-driven race while school-choice competition empowers families to move their students into nearby districts that are performing higher on standardized assessments or other accountability measures.

This literature review provides a historical perspective of school facilities and referenda history, experiences with Midwestern states' history and current conditions of referenda, demographics and other community factors associated with school referenda, and finally strategies that researchers have found to be paramount in the passage or defeat of school referenda. The factors and strategies identified by Johnson and Ingle (2008) and Holt et al. (2006) served as a foundation for school district success with tax referendums in their previous studies. The primary factors and strategies common to both studies were a focus on yes voters and communication with the community.

#### **Background**

Research indicates that half of U.S. schools have unsatisfactory environmental conditions, including a lack of appropriate acoustics for noise control, poor ventilation, and inadequate physical security (Holt et al., 2006). The issue of building conditions was investigated by a study conducted in 2000 by the National Education Association; they estimated that “268 billion is needed to bring the nation’s schools up to acceptable standards for basic issues such as plumbing, roof integrity, lighting, and safety” (Holt et al., 2006, p. 1). The American Federation of Teacher’s (AFT) publication, *Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning Crumbling Schools into Environments for Learning*, was commissioned in response to Section 5414 of the No Child Left Behind Act on the “health and learning aspects of environmentally unhealthy public-school buildings on students and teachers” (Cash & Twiford, 2009, p. 3). The commissioned report found that poor environments in schools adversely influenced the health, performance, and attendance of students (Cash & Twiford, 2009). Daily, millions of students attend structurally deteriorating schools that put their health and safety at risk. According to the Government Accountability Office and the American Society of Civil Engineers, school districts have been underspending on maintenance and repair for many years (Research Services, 2012). School officials and educators maintain that the debate over how to improve education in the U.S. has ignored one critical element: the physical condition of the schools in the district (Research Services, 2012).

Numerous studies have been conducted that demonstrate a positive relationship between the condition of school facilities and student success (Holt & Smith, 2002). School districts in Indiana are not immune to the growing needs of their school facilities. A report from the GAO (1995) found that 29% of school districts in Indiana had at least one inadequate building of any type, whether it was the original part of the building, an addition, or a temporary building.

Additionally, 67% of the schools had at least one unsatisfactory environmental factor (Lambert, 2012). The report showed that 28% of schools in Indiana had at least one inadequate building feature and one inadequate building type (Lambert, 2012). Schools in need of facility enhancements, new buildings to accommodate growth, and other renovations must move forward under the current referenda process if the amount of these projects exceeds a certain percentage of the assessed valuation of the school district's tax base. This process involves seeking voter support and gaining a majority of their votes. This is symbolic of the diffusion model which undergirds the notion of community buy-in and support.

Research by Hanover Research (2012) discovered additional factors that may contribute to the passage or failure of school referendums. One was that voters were less likely to approve referendums that were considered "non-essential," such as those pertaining to the arts or athletics. In some cases, districts found success in school referendums by removing these non-essential projects from the referendum. Districts need to actively involve community members in every step of the referendum campaign. Research has shown that citizens are much more likely to be influenced by their neighbors or friends than by elected school board officials or district administrators; and therefore, campaigns led by prominent community members are more likely to succeed. Lastly, the most common method for increasing voter support was to decrease the funding amount requested in the referendum.

### **History of Referendums**

School referenda are commonplace for most states in the US. Each state has its own policies on how voters decide how school projects or bonding issues will be issued, but nearly all states utilize voter input in the process. Additionally, school districts most often send bonding issues to the voters for either operating costs or building costs that will if passed ultimately

impact local tax rates of the community. In order to understand the referendum process in Indiana as well as the differences between operating and controlled project referenda, the following sections provide a brief history of the policies and processes in Midwestern States first, followed by a more in-depth review of the history of referenda in Indiana as well as current statistics on passage and failure rates of referenda for both operating and controlled projects.

### **History of Referendum in Midwestern States of Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin**

As with many states, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin represent three states with very active elections on school referenda. These states fund public education through a combination of local property taxes and state aid. Ohio is unique in its frequency of which voters are asked to decide school budget referenda. Ohio relies on voter approval of tax levies to support public education to a greater extent than any other state in the nation (Ingle et al., 2012). From 1994 to 2006, there were 3,433 local school tax issues on ballots in Ohio. A 1976 constitutional amendment originally known as House Bill 920 prohibited property taxes from increasing as property values rose, thus forcing school districts to continually return to the ballot just to keep up with inflationary costs (Ingle et al., 2009).

Similar to Ohio, school districts in Wisconsin and Indiana have strict revenue growth limits imposed by state law, and voter approval is the only means of exceeding the limits. Referenda for bypassing state-imposed constraints come in one of two forms, either through a traditional bonding referendum that seeks approval to borrow for capital projects, or by a request to exceed the revenue growth cap. Consequently, the passage of a referendum to exceed the revenue caps grants the district authority to collect revenues, largely property taxes, in excess of statutory limitations. In general, these referenda enable a district to raise revenue above their legal limits for operations (Maher & Skidmore, 2009).

Michigan school districts have the authority to issue bonds if they adhere to the guidelines set by the state and receive at least 50% of votes in a bond referendum. While the guidelines allow for the issuance of debt to “defray the cost of purchasing, erecting, completing, remodeling, improving, furnishing, refurbishing, equipping, or reequipping school buildings,” they do not allow debt to be issued for longer than the life span of the asset (Zimmer et al., 2011, p. 9). Michigan is of special interest because it is representative of a Midwestern state that has experienced an economic downturn in the post-industrial U.S economy over the past several decades. Michigan had a total of 568 public school districts in 2006. Between the years 1998 and 2006, Michigan school districts had 793 statewide bond elections of which 394 (49.7%) passed. Before proposing a bond, school districts engage in a lengthy strategic planning process that includes a careful definition of the project’s scope and an inventory of the district’s educational, facility, and program needs. The process also includes an assessment of the current and future capital needs, a projection of enrollment trends, the development of a master plan, and input from the community and school staff. Beginning and end dates as well as consultation with architects, financial consultants, and attorneys to develop a detailed budget are also necessary (Zimmer et al., 2011).

Voting trends in Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin have proven to be an uphill battle for school districts despite rising inflationary needs and growing school populations in many suburban and city districts. Between 1994 and November 2006, Ohio voters only approved 40.4% of all new property and income tax levies, while renewal and replacement levies were approved by voters at a rate of 83.3% (Ingle et al., 2012). Over the past five years, Ohio voters only approved 54.6% of all operating levies statewide, including renewal levies (Ingle et al., 2009). Over a similar time period (1991-2004), Wisconsin voters had 1901 referenda questions

presented throughout the state. Of those, 1,365 were for bonding/capital projects and 536 sought to exceed the revenue limits (Ingle et al., 2012). In general, bonding/capital projects had a much higher pass rate compared with questions to exceed the revenue caps, with 54% vs. 40% success rates, respectively (Ingle et al., 2012). Interestingly, pass rates averaged just over 50% and were highest before 1997. Further, pass rates for revenue referenda dropped as low as 35%. More recently, Bowers et al. (2010) found that rural districts were at a greater disadvantage in passing bond elections than urban/suburban districts. Rural and small municipality school districts were also less likely to pass school construction bonds in Michigan (Ingle et al., 2012).

### **Construction Referenda**

Construction or controlled projects referendums center around building projects including the building of new schools or facilities. At the onset of referendums, schools followed a model that required that a referendum took place if the requested cost was over 10 million dollars for elementary and middle schools and over 20 million dollars for high schools. Since this time, legislation has passed in the Indiana State Government that altered this process. Currently, controlled projects fall under a new set of guidelines that require the referendum process if a certain amount or percentage of the local assessed valuation is proposed. The referendum process allows taxpayers to vote on a proposed project through a ballot. If a project will cost between \$5,000,001 (\$5,170,001 for 2019) and \$15 million (\$15,510,000 for 2019) and involves an elementary school building, middle school building, high school building, or other school building for academic instruction that will be used for any combination of kindergarten through grade 12, this would be a controlled project subject to the referendum process (Department of Local Governance Finance, DLGF, 2019). The referendum process also applies to a controlled project for which the cost of that project, plus the costs of all previous controlled projects

adopted by the taxing unit in the preceding 365 days, is over \$25 million (DLGF, 2019). Forty states in the U.S require voters to approve the issue for bonds for school construction. In seven other states, referenda are not required, but voters can require having bond issues placed on the ballot (CEEP, 2011). Within these 47 states, the laws differ on the types of construction referenda that require voter approval and on the limits to the amount of tax increase that can be sought, making it difficult to detail practices in other states. Indiana most closely fits into the second group of states for construction referenda, since a referendum most often occurs if voters successfully obtain enough signatures to require it or if a school district's construction project exceeds the pre-established limits. Some states categorize school districts into classifications including urban, metropolitan, and non-metropolitan, while others allow the state board of education to handle bonding projects (CEEP, 2011).

### **General Fund Referenda**

General fund referendums are sought when a school district wishes to place on the ballot a referendum that will allow the district to raise the school tax levy for the district. They are called operating referendums as they are proposed to allow schools to continue with the current level of operations. These types are usually lesser in total cost and are proposed over a seven-year timeline. Schools can propose a new general referendum or seek to renew a prior general referendum either before or after the seven years. These types of referendums are most closely related with an increase in personnel, funding for employees, and other operating costs. General referendums became more popular when Indiana enacted new tax caps on property taxes, which limited a district's ability to generate revenue through property taxes. One guiding principle of general referendums is that a district's proposal on the need to replace funding that is no longer available due to the restructuring of the taxing system. State policies regarding general fund

referenda vary widely making it difficult to provide a precise summary of states' practices. Several states in various regions of the country place a ceiling on property tax rates and require referenda for school districts to exceed those rates (CEEP, 2011). In other states, including Arizona, school budgets are put on the ballot should they exceed an operating limit defined by law. Voters can reject the budget, forcing the school to select a budget within the limit (CEEP, 2011). As explained further in the review, Indiana's system utilizes a voter referendum process if property tax increases above established caps will be enacted (CEEP, 2011).

### **Indiana Referenda History**

In 2005, Indiana Governor Daniels issued Executive Order 05-19 that gave the Department of Local Governance Finance (DLGF) the authority to develop guidelines with regard to school construction and no action was taken on any school construction projects, which left many Indiana School Districts waiting idly by. Within three years of this order, the DLGF was removed from this equation (Lambert, 2012). In 2008, the Indiana General Assembly passed Public Law 146 (P.L. 146, House Enrolled Act 1001-2008) that altered numerous aspects of taxes and school funding (CEEP, 2011). School referendum questions became a common ballot measure in Indiana back in 2008, after the legislature voted to enact tax caps. The caps were written into the state constitution, and the amendment said the government may not collect taxes equaling more than one percent of an owner-occupied residence, two percent for other residential properties, and three percent for all other properties (State Impact, 2015). Due to these legislative changes, school districts began placing referenda questions to voters on May and November ballots to offset revenues loss by the newly imposed tax caps. There are two types of school questions that can appear on the ballot in Indiana — construction referenda and general fund referenda. The former funds major facilities projects, including new construction and building

renovation. The latter deals with school operating expenses, which can include everything from teacher salaries to transportation expenses (State Impact, 2015). Currently in Indiana, controlled projects that are above \$2 million yet below \$15.5 million or 1% of the Total Assessed Valuation of the district are subject to the petition and remonstrance process. Projects exceeding \$15.5 million must go through the referendum process (DLGF, 2020).

Regardless of cost of the project or type of the referendum, school districts have three options when proposing referendum to the local voters. The three options are time-based. Districts must choose to hold school referendums in either May (Primary Elections Season), November (General Elections Season) or they are allowed to hold the referendum at any other point of the year. The latter option, however, is highly infrequent due to the cost incurred. If school districts choose to hold the referendum at a time other than a previously scheduled national, state, or local election, they must pay for the election contest and all associated costs. Due to the term limits of elected officers, nearly all states have one or more elections in either May or November each year or every other year. May and November elections are usually chosen as schools save approximately \$50,000-\$60,000 dollars out of their school expenditures. There are additional reasons why schools carefully consider when to propose their referendum campaigns and hold the referendum election.

### **Indiana Referenda Data 2008-2020**

In 2011, CEEP asked all Indiana Superintendents on referendum campaigns to participate in an online survey which sought input regarding their referendum efforts. Of these 17 school districts, 15 school districts responded; five were successful in referendum campaigns and 10 were unsuccessful. Additionally, of these 15 respondents, 12 sought general fund referendums while three sought building construction referendum. Of the five successful districts, all cited

clear communication with their communities on the need of the referendum as an attribute of success. Most mentioned a campaign plan as well as previous budget reductions prior to the referendum. All five cited retaining teachers or maintaining educational programs as purposes of the requested referendum funds (Hiller & Spradlin, 2011). All but one had developed a community task force with citizens as members to help guide the referendum.

In the same yet modified survey, the 10 respondents who oversaw the failed referendums were asked what they attributed to their school district's referendums defeat. All of the respondents noted a general "anti-tax" sentiment, general concerns about the economy, and the circulation of misinformation about the referendum (Hiller & Spradlin, 2011). Although these districts cited retaining teachers and educational programs as the key reasons for the referendum, they were not successful. Eight of the 10 had also created community task forces to help guide their referendums.

Since 2008, there have been 198 referendums placed before voters. One hundred and twenty of these referenda have been general fund and 77 have been for construction, with one being for debt financing. In sum, 124 total referenda (62.6%) passed and 74 (37.2%) failed. General fund referenda passed at a rate of 68.3%, with construction referenda passing at a rate of 53.2% (CEEP, 2019). Demographically, passing rates have favored districts categorized as suburban or city, with 67.7% and 70.2% success rates respectively, compared to rural and town referenda, which passed at 59% and 44% respectively. Multiple factors are related to these differences including economic conditions, population size, assessed valuation of the district, and SES levels of the locale. General fund referenda had the most success in suburban and rural areas with nearly a 70% passing rate. City passing rates were approximately 10% lower. Construction referenda however have shown different passing rates. Construction referenda have had the most

success in cities, where 83.3% passed, compared to the 50% or lower success rates in suburban, rural, and town school districts. Construction referenda had a less-positive results, especially in rural areas at only 39.1 passing rate. Interestingly, despite the number of rural districts as compared to suburban districts, towns, and city districts, there have only been 59 rural referenda as compared to 129 for suburban, towns, and city districts (CEEP, 2019)

Table 1: CEEP Database 2019

<i>Type of Referendum</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Passed</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Failed</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>All Referenda</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>62.8%</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>37.2%</b>
Rural	59	34	57.6%	25	42.4%
Town	23	11	47.8%	12	52.2%
Suburb	62	42	67.7%	20	32.3%
City	44	31	70.5%	13	29.5%
<b>All General Fund Referenda</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>67.9%</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>32.1%</b>
Rural	36	25	69.4%	11	30.6%
Town	11	5	45.5%	6	54.5%
Suburb	39	30	76.9%	9	23.1%
City	26	16	61.5%	10	38.5%
<b>All Construction Referenda</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>54.7%</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>45.3%</b>
Rural	23	9	39.1%	14	60.9%
Town	12	6	50.0%	6	50.0%
Suburb	22	11	50.0%	11	50.0%
City	18	15	83.3%	3	16.7%
<b>Debt Refinancing Referenda</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.0%</b>
Rural	0	0	--	0	--
Town	0	0	--	0	--
Suburb	1	1	100.0%	0	0.0%
City	0	0	--	0	--

### Variables Associated with Successful Passage of School Referenda

Multiple variables including student achievement, teacher and student attitudes, SES, district demographics, and class size can affect the likely passage of a referenda, and age subpopulations are also associated with the passage or failure of school referenda. Additionally,

financial factors, including the average tax rate increase to the residents of the district, significantly impact the passing or failing rate as well as the average percentages of voters in favor or against the proposed referendum. Some of these variables are unique to the district and can have a major impact on the overall outcome of the bond issue. Subsequently, these areas have also been researched to help discover what, if any, relationships exist between the variables and passage or failure rates. Additionally, these variables are associated with the external and internal factors that are part of the overall referendum process (Cash & Twiford, 2010).

### **Student Achievement**

Substandard school buildings have been shown to have a direct effect on student achievement. Over 60 years of research have supported the positive relationship between building quality and student achievement (Cash & Twiford, 2010). In a study of small rural high schools in Virginia, Cash (1993) found a connection between building condition and student achievement as measured by standardized tests. Similar results were discovered by Cash and other researchers in future replication studies. Researchers from the United States have been joined by international researchers in confirming the link between building structure and achievement. Buildings that are in poor shape present challenges to the educational environment. Building factors are categorized as either cosmetic or structural. The cosmetic factors, those that can be seen, consistently relate to improved student achievement (Cash & Twiford, 2009).

Structural factors, including air-conditioning and heating, have also been linked to student achievement. Specific factors that have been noted repeatedly to influence student achievement include natural lighting, paint colors and paint cycles, general cleanliness, air quality, temperature control, acoustical enhancements, safety features, absence of graffiti, and air conditioning (Cash & Twiford, 2009). Cash (2010) reported that the condition of facilities can

account for as many as 11 percentile points difference on student accountability assessments.

When using assessments such as the Iowa Tests for Basic Skills or the California Tests of Basic Skills and when controlling for socioeconomic conditions, a significant difference (5-17 percentile points) has been found in the academic performance of students who attend schools in poor condition compared to students whose schools are in standard condition (Lavy, Garcia, Scinto & Dixit, 2014; Earthman, 2003). For example, Earthman (2003) found that building age accounted for 3.3% to 6.4% of the variance of student learning on three of the five subtests and 5.3% of the variance of student learning on the composite score of students on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

When controlling for SES and other variables, additional studies have noted that students in modern school buildings scored significantly better in reading, listening, language arts, and math than did students attending older structures (Holt, 2002). The American Federation of Teacher's (AFT) publication, *Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning Crumbling Schools into Environments of Learning*, reported that "poor environments in schools adversely influence the health, performance and attendance of students" (Cash & Twiford, 2010, p. 3). The AFT also noted the link between student learning and noise, overcrowding, and air quality conditions.

Holt (2012) maintained that all contact during the referendum process should emphasize the needs of the children. Leary (2007) suggested that using materials designed to highlight the benefits to the children in the schools in question were more likely to create a positive reaction with voters. Crampton and Thompson (2008) shared that if the citizens of our country are going to be committed to higher standards to compete globally, our government must recognize the impact that the physical environment plays in student health and learning. If we expect school personnel to perform at the highest levels, we should also expect school buildings to meet the

highest standards of facility excellence (Crampton & Thompson, 2008). There is evidence that an effect on student achievement exists six years after the bond issue (Cellini et al., 2008)

### **Class Size**

Class size is yet another important consideration in student achievement and, at times, is impacted by the passage or failure of school referendum. Many buildings lack the space to accommodate the rapid growth school districts have experienced. Unfortunately, many districts have no viable choice other than to raise class sizes in the current buildings. The reality for administrators and superintendents is that resources are limited. School size, and in particular class size, has been researched extensively over the last two decades with varying results on school size and definitive results on class size ratios. Maxwell's (1999) examination of student performance in 21 public schools that had been renovated in Syracuse, NY found that after the renovations mathematics test scores improved for 3rd and 6th graders, but reading scores did not. In a more recent study, Maxwell (2007) found that the quality of a classroom's physical environment affects preschool children's cognitive competence. In classrooms that were rated higher on physical characteristics related to attributes such as control, privacy, complexity, etc., children scored higher on a measure of cognitive abilities than their peers in classrooms with lower ratings (Darun-Narucki, 2008).

The research on reduced class size is extensive, showing that reduced class sizes can increase student achievement (Adams, 2010). The most extensive experiment revealing the benefits of small class size was Project STAR, conducted in Tennessee in the late 1980s. It found that children randomly assigned to small class sizes of 13 to 17 students in grades K-3 scored significantly higher on achievement tests than those in regular classes of 22 to 25 students or those in regular-size classes with a teacher's aide (Adams, 2010). Class size reduction is another

theme to which voters can relate. Reduced class size is often a goal of school district referendums (Crampton & Thompson, 2008). It is difficult to find an educator or parent who is not in favor of smaller classes. However, the reality for school districts is limited resources. Class sizes must be weighed along with other approaches to improve student achievement.

### **Student Attitudes**

Student attitudes toward school can also have a relationship with the physical attributes of the school. Studies have indicated that student attitudes become more positive after they move into a new or renovated school building (Research Services, 2010). It is difficult to prove a causal relationship between student attitudes and new or renovated school buildings; thus, findings have suggested a strong association between new surroundings and improvements in students' perceptions of their education experience. Rudd and colleagues (2008) found that the greatest improvements in attitudes were in students' feelings of safety and pride. In both cases, the percentages went up dramatically after post studies (Research Services, 2010). Student and staff attitudes are important factors in student success. In previous work on how the brain works, Marzano (2007) highlighted the relationship between students and teachers as a necessary component to student learning. Attitudes are significant in establishing and maintaining the relationships that enhance learning.

### **Teacher Attitudes**

The condition of the school facilities also has a relationship with teacher empowerment, which is strongly related to students' academic achievement (Lavy et al., 2014). Experts also agree that teacher satisfaction is influenced by the condition of the school building (Cash & Twiford, 2009). Buildings in better physical condition have been associated with higher teacher morale, sense of personal safety, feelings of effectiveness, less absenteeism, and improved job

satisfaction in the classroom (Research Services, 2012). Environmental factors of the school building can impact teacher retention and have been identified as an important predictor of teachers' decisions to leave their current position. Consistency and continuity serve the best interest of students in all settings. Numerous studies have found that quality teachers are attracted to and remain longer at higher quality school buildings (Research Services, 2010). Teacher satisfaction is basic to the attitude necessary for building relationships. Ruzala's (2008) study reaffirmed the connection between the condition of the building and teacher attitude (Cash & Twiford, 2010).

### **Economic Times**

In these difficult economic times school leaders strive to improve student performance while maintaining building maintenance. This task has become more formidable amid the ever-changing legislative cycles that concurrently dictate the manner in which schools are funded. School administrators must make critical choices regarding school operating budgets (Adams, 2010). School districts also must consider the impact facilities have on the school environment and school logistical concerns. School administrators must spread awareness of the positive impact of reducing student-teacher ratios to convince state lawmakers of the need for more school funding, or they must seek voter approval for levy increases (Adams, 2010). The harsh reality for many school districts across the United States is that without gaining additional funds from a voter referendum, school staffs will be reduced, student-teacher ratios will increase, and money will not be available to purchase instructional materials (Cash & Twiford, 2009).

### **Age Subpopulations**

With regard to demographic/district variables, previous studies have found that the percentage of elderly voters was not associated with a decrease in educational spending per

student except when the elderly and school age populations came from different racial groups (Ingle et al., 2012). Ehrenberg et al. (2004) found the higher the proportion of residents in a district that are above the age of 65, the less likely that initial budget proposals were defeated. Conversely, other studies have indicated that retirees prefer a decrease in the amount of spending on education, rationalizing that they will not live to see the benefits (Ingle et al., 2012). Seniors may be less willing to support educational upgrades and building improvements if they feel the existing structures were adequate when they were in school and should be “good enough” for a new generation of students (Holt, 2009). Additionally, this subgroup of citizens may be more sensitive to higher property taxes due to living on a fixed income.

Further, other researchers suggested that voters are more willing to support a referendum if they value education as an investment, regardless of how they are personally affected. In fact, recent research suggests that tax expenditures on school facilities through a bond referendum can have positive returns on housing values (Zimmer et al., 2011). Childless households may support education funding out of altruism (Clark et al., 2009) or even self-interest, if they believe that improved quality in local schools will increase their home values (Brunner & Baldson, 2004). The literature examining the relationship between seniors and education funding is extensive, but mixed results suggest that untangling this complex and possibly evolving relationship requires more work (Clark et al., 2009).

### **District Characteristics and SES**

Research has examined the relationship of district characteristics to school budget referenda outcomes, with the four subgroups most frequently examined including rural, town, suburban, and urban/cities. Examination of referenda from Illinois by Lentz (1999) used jurisdictional typology consisting of six categories of school districts based on land use (Ingle et

al., 2012). Lentz found that homogenous districts (small rural and residential suburbs) had significantly higher passage rates than heterogeneous districts. This was incongruent when compared to data from Indiana since 2008. For all jurisdictional types, the most important predictors of referendum outcomes were land use homogeneity, prior willingness to pay higher taxes for schools, and capacity to pay (Ingle et al., 2012). More recently, Bowers et al. (2010) found that rural districts were at a disadvantage in passing bond elections compared to urban/suburban districts. School districts in municipalities fared the worst of all. Bowers et al. (2010a, 2010b) found rural and small municipality school districts in Michigan less likely to pass school construction bonds. However, it should be noted that the authors did not find comparable data in a Texas school construction bonds study; this suggests that district locale and location may impact results, and outcomes may be state and context specific (Ingle et al., 2012). Possibly a stronger predictor of school referenda passage beyond demographics is the SES level of the voting population, with higher SES of a school district showing a higher likelihood of voting yes (Bowers & Lee, 2013).

### **Tax Rates**

Through its collection of school referendum data over the last eight years, CEEP (2019) found that the average tax increase was at \$.027 per every \$100 per assessed valuation for passing referenda, and the average tax rate increase was \$.035 for failed referenda. The average requested tax rate increase has been \$.307. The average tax rate increase requested for general referenda has been \$.0279, with construction referenda at \$.340. For general fund referenda, the average tax rate increase has been \$.258 for passing referenda, with the referenda failing with a \$.322 average tax rate increase. For construction referenda, the average tax increase was \$.307 for successful referenda, and the average tax rate increase was \$.381 for failed requests. Despite

the type of referenda, data has shown that lower tax rate increases have a higher percentage of passing. However, both referenda types are different and therefore require deeper analysis of proposed rate increases for the cost and purpose of the referenda. These descriptive statistics will be examined in multivariate analysis in the research and design phase of the study.

### **Indiana Demographics**

Referendum statistics from Indiana from 2008-2019 show similar, but not overwhelming, relationships in the voting trends of various demographics and locales. Indiana voters in suburban and city ballots voted in favor of passing school district referenda at a rate 10-12% higher than voters in rural and town districts. Indiana has fewer locales identified as cities, rural and suburban. City districts were likeliest to pass general fund referenda with over 83% success, while suburban and rural areas passed referenda at rates of 75.9% and 69.4%, respectively. When examining the differences in passage of general fund referenda vs. construction referenda, rural districts saw the biggest decrease in voter passage rates of construction projects followed by suburban districts. In these locales, construction referenda have shown passing rates drop by nearly 30%. Cities, however, were the one locale that actually had a much higher rate of passing construction projects than general referenda, with a 22% increase in construction referenda. Rural districts saw lower passage rates for construction referenda, with only 39.1% passing since 2008 (CEEP, 2019).

### **Indiana Voting Elections**

Until July 1, 2009 Indiana law did not require referenda to be held on the primary or general election schedule (CEEP, 2019). Due to this, the overall statistics on school referenda in Indiana can also be viewed from 2010 when this process began. Since 2008, there have been 172 total referenda in Indiana, with 106 of them general fund referenda compared to 57 construction

or debt refinancing referenda. In this time, 73% of all referenda (N=96) have passed with 27% failing. However, Indiana referenda passage rates can also be viewed in two separate referenda periods. In Indiana, school districts may opt to place referenda to the public on either the May or November ballot depending on the voting year and if it is a general or primary election. CEEP (2019) discovered that between 2010 and 2019, of the 172 referenda, 106 of them have been placed before voters on May elections, compared to 66 referenda being placed on November elections. May elections have yielded 73 general referenda and 35 construction referenda. May elections have produced passing rates for general referenda at 76%, with 54 of 71 passing; and passing rates for construction referenda at 66%, or 23 of 35 passing. Conversely, November referenda have not had the same level of success as those attempted in May. November elections have yielded 66 overall referenda, with 43 of them general and 22 of them construction. Of these 66, only 56% (N=37) of November referenda have passed, with general and construction referenda sharing nearly identical passing rates of 56% and 55%, respectively. Percentages show nearly an 18% higher passing rate for referenda that are put forth in May elections and nearly a 20% higher passing rate for general referenda. Breakdowns per locale were not available in the 2019 CEEP database.

### **Strategies for Passing School Referenda**

Strategies for getting referenda passed by voters have been researched extensively by Fairbank (2006), Ingle et al. (2012), and Holt et al. (2006). Several strategies emerged as key variables for districts to enact to improve passing rates in both general fund and construction referenda. Other studies have examined what factors are related to the outcome of school levies, budget referenda, or bond issues (Ingle et al., 2009). This review uses the work of the aforementioned authors as a cornerstone of previous strategies that have proved successful in

referenda campaigns. Fairbank (2006) shared that the decision to borrow the money does not lie in the hands of the board or the superintendent. Instead, it is up to the district's voters, some of whom are parents and employees and others who may know very little about the district and may be more concerned about higher tax bills than building a new high school or adding to the operating budget of the district (Fairbank, 2006).

Fairbank (2006), Holt (2002), and Ingle et al. (2009) noted 10 specific strategies that assist a school district in passing referenda. The list included (a) surveying likely voters, (b) getting the school board's support, (c) crafting a winning message, (d) educating the media, (e) identifying supporters, (f) building a campaign organization, (g) creating a campaign timeline, (h) developing a fundraising plan, (i) putting together a voter contact program, and (j) getting out the vote (Fairbank, 2006; Holt et al., 2006; Ingle et al., 2009). A solid campaign strategy through Election Day is necessary to increase the odds of getting the public to pass the referenda. According to Steve Klink, a political strategist in campaign management for various Indiana School Districts, "the single most important aspect to a referenda campaign is scientific research of the likely voters in the district" (CEEP, 2011, p 5). Identifying likely voters is different than identifying all voters or even registered voters as it is more targeted to those who will actually show up on Election Day.

Additionally, a report by Hanover Research (2012) outlined best practices in increasing public support during school bond election campaigns. In the report *Strategies to Increase Public Support for Bond Measures*, the researchers listed key strategies whose implementation by district officials gains the public's trust and support of the proposed referendum, including (a) demonstrating a substantial need for a referendum; (b) considering ways they can increase the beneficiaries from the bond issues, including allowing community organizations access to

proposed new school buildings outside of school hours; and (c) allowing public access to newly constructed gymnasiums or athletic fields. Additional measures found to increase voter support included (d) educating the community on the long-term and widespread benefits of bond issues; (e) avoiding bond issues that are perceived as being “non-essential,” including those pertaining to the arts or athletics; and (f) actively involving community leaders in every step of the campaign. Last and possibly most importantly, the most common method cited for increasing voter support among school districts was (g) reducing the funding amount requested in the bond issue and being willing to compromise or even exclude plans for the proposed bond (Hanover Research, 2012).

### **Likely Voters**

Comprehensive scientific polling data or survey data that provides insight into the opinions of likely voters is paramount in referenda campaigns. Fairbank (2006) identified the necessity of determining if voters understand the need for certain projects, what projects the voters are willing to fund, and at what dollar level (Fairbank, 2006). Bali (2008) noted that individual decision-making at the polls is motivated by ideological predispositions, self-interest, and racially-based incentives (Ingle et al., 2012). Steve Klink (CEEP, 2011) claimed that the demographics of likely voters begin to form, and matching this data to the list of likely voters yields the most productive list of targeted community members and improves likelihood of success at the polls.

### **School Board Support**

The school board is usually an elected body of either five or seven individuals who are representative of the community. According to Holt et al. (2006), it is imperative that the superintendent is guaranteed a unanimous vote of support by the members of the district school

board before even bringing a referendum before the voters. Superintendents must ensure that a board is united behind the decision to move forward; and if contention exists, concessions must be made to create a coalition (Holt, 2002). “If school board members send mixed messages to the public about the architectural design or the need for the bond issue many voters will develop a concern about the advisability of the project” (Holt, 2002, p.19). A dissenting board member can easily derail the campaign by being a vocal and credible opponent (Fairbank, 2006).

Consequently, it is advised that board members and administrators keep as low a profile as possible (Holt et al., 2006). The school board’s role in the referendum process is very important. Not only should the members be unanimous with their support for the referendum, but also they need to be involved in the overall process (Lambert, 2012). According to Wirt and Kirst (2005), the school board has to become even more political as they mobilize community support for the needed referendums or voter support for the referendums may deteriorate.

### **Crafting a Winning and Simple Message**

A strong message should lead all discussions and debates about the ballot issue; it should be a school district’s rallying point (Fairbank, 2006). Voters want and need to know all the information about the proposed referenda. Superintendents and school boards must keep their plans simple and do everything possible to utilize existing district funds to lessen the impact on the voters while also highlighting the needs for the referenda (Holt et al., 2006; Johnson & Ingle, 2009). School districts can increase viability by welcoming patrons to school tours, community events, and other forums which will allow the message to be shared by credible sources. School administrators and superintendents need to meet with employees, campaign activists, and supporters to create a very simple yet deliberate message that highlights key issues. Holt et al. (2006) suggested school districts should create catchy phrases to their referendum campaign to

help voters remember key points of the campaign. These catch phrases remind voters why the school needs their vote (Holt et al., 2006). Printed material with these phrases should be hung in business windows, used as yard signs, and placed in newspapers as advertisements. Additionally, a campaign logo should be adopted that communicates the positive theme and reasoning for the referendum. Opinions and questions as to the needs of the projects take on many different perspectives and the amount of information can be overwhelming to the less involved. A referendum campaign must be positive. School district officials and employees must build trust and, at the same time, a sense of community (CEEP, 2011).

### **Educating the Media**

Successful campaigns use local media to inform voters about the project (Fairbank, 2006). Holt et al. (2006) discovered that the local media and school staff members should be involved in the early planning stages of the campaign. Ingle et al. (2012) identified the need for communicating important information and developing good relationships with the local media. Media members should be invited in the early stages of the process to ensure clarity and to begin to get the message out to voters. Once the campaign message has been developed, it is time to begin educating newspaper, radio, and television reporters who cover your district. Johnson and Ingle (2008) found “variables for specific media venues/techniques, utilizing the local newspaper increased the likelihood of passage almost 11 times, and districts that used brochures were 4% more likely to pass their levy than districts that did not use brochures” (p. 23). Holt et al. (2006) recommended campaigns to utilize telephone campaigning, coffees in home, parent-teacher meetings, door-to-door canvassing, and direct mailings from the citizen’s committee as techniques for educating the community about the needs of the school district.

Successful media campaigns target potential voters through several different mediums. Generally, information can be disseminated through radio or television ads, local newspaper articles, brochures, flyers, or newsletters. However, in the last decade social media has become an increasingly important strategy to increase public awareness. Facebook and Twitter are two viable options (Hanover Research, 2012).

### **Identifying Supporters of the Referendum**

Ingle et al. (2012) suggested that community members can be the greatest adversaries or allies to a district's efforts. For the community to be the latter, school leaders must be open to community engagement and must gain extensive knowledge of the communities in which they serve. School leaders must provide meaningful ways in which stakeholders can be involved in the education of their youth. Referenda activists need authentic participation from stakeholders. In the case of school referenda, the behaviors and participation of stakeholders can range widely. Behaviors and participation of stakeholders may be limited to ballot casting at the polls, or stakeholders may be heavily engaged as active campaign volunteers (Ingle et al., 2012). Potential volunteers must be motivated and encouraged to participate. Holt (2006, pp. 4-7) published a study intended to determine the perceived most influential factors that led to two successful bond referendums in one rural mid-size school district. The study asked participants to rank order recommended activities in priority of significance to the passage of the two bonds. Of 11 activities on the list, the activity most often ranked number one was that the board and administrators established a diverse community task force or facility study committee. According to survey participants, this committee was successful largely because it was comprised of a diverse group of ordinary people who presented a unanimous front that elicited trust in the proposed bond measures while also listening and responding to the concerns of the community

(Holt et al., 2006). These findings highlight the need for active community involvement in successful bond election campaigns.

### **Building a Campaign Organization**

Citizen involvement is the most frequently cited component of effective bond election campaigns (Hanover Research, 2012). By reaching out to community members and actively recruiting and coordinating with them, administrators and referendum supporters can increase awareness of district needs. One campaign organization strategy is to create steering committees, responsible for identifying areas of need, and community action committees, responsible for increasing the percentage of yes voters (Hanover Research, 2012). Holt et al. (2006) acknowledged the need to establish a diverse community task force or facilities committee. Fairbank (2006) shared that all campaigns need an organization to make them run. Suggestions included recruiting supporters to take an active role in the campaign and assigning specific tasks to each member of the steering committee (Fairbank, 2006). Influential and credible members of the district, including business leaders, members of local civic organizations, and active PTA members, should be contacted to serve in these roles (Fairbank, 2006). Holt et al. (2006) shared that the citizen's committee should concentrate a great deal of effort on disseminating information through flyers, brochures, question and answer sheets, and other printed material. One study reported that only 66% of superintendent respondents indicated that community stakeholders had been involved in their district's levy campaigns (Johnson & Ingle, 2009).

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction suggested that districts should solicit as much community involvement as possible during the initial developmental phases of the plans (Hanover Research, 2012). Additionally, community-based steering committees should be the primary entities responsible for overseeing bond election campaigns. Importantly, most of

the literature surrounding bond election campaigns agrees that community leaders, not district administrators, should be the primary advocates of the campaign (Hanover Research, 2012; Holt et al., 2006; Fairbank, 2006). Since citizens often distrust the district school board or other school officials, they may be more inclined to question these parties' motives in applying for a bond. When the campaign is led by community members, voters may be more inclined to view projects in a positive light, as potentially beneficial to the entire community. When the campaign is led by their neighbors, friends, and other respected members of the community, citizens may also seek to better educate themselves by asking more questions about the key issues in the campaign (Hanover Research, 2012),

### **Creating a Campaign Timeline**

It is a daunting task to ask voters to increase their taxes for any reason. Events, meetings, and important dates must be planned well in advance to allow plenty of lead-time for members of the campaign as well as those in opposition (Fairbank, 2006). A campaign calendar with critical timelines and benchmarks for action should be developed at the onset of the campaign. The timing and length of a campaign can be factors, but most researchers have reported that neither the time nor the length of the campaign was a significant factor in the outcomes to the elections (Holt, 2002). Additionally, the timing of the placement of the referenda on the ballot has been noted by some researchers as important. Larry DeBoer, professor of agricultural economics at Purdue, studies local government budgets and has followed the trends with Indiana's referenda since 2008. He says, typically, school districts that pose their questions during the May primary see a higher success rate. "About two-thirds of all the referendums posed in May have passed, but only 36% of those tried in November actually pass" (DeBoer, 2014). A well-developed base of literature has shown that the timing of elections matters a great deal for voter turnout.

When cities and school districts hold elections at times other than state and national elections, voter turnout is far lower than when those elections are held at the same time as presidential or gubernatorial elections (Anzia, 2011). Anzia (2011) asserted that the lower voter turnout that accompanies off-cycle election timing empowers the largest and best-organized interest groups to have greater influence on election outcomes. In contrast, Dr. Larry DeBoer contended,

What I think happens is – in a May election the folks who show up are motivated.

There's often not much else happening in a May primary election to attract voters. But in an ordinary May election a school referendum may be the most important thing on the ballot (DeBoer, 2014).

### **Developing a Fundraising Plan**

According to Fairbank (2006), campaigns need money and this requires a solid fundraising plan. Developing a list of likely donors is beneficial to a referenda campaign. In addition, ensuring that donors are properly educated about all the aspects of the referenda, the campaign, and the budget is necessary, as they need to know why their financial support is needed. Regarding factors that led to successful bond elections, Holt et al. (2006) found that the activity stakeholders ranked fifth (of 11) was spending resources and time to get yes voters to the polls, rather than spending resources and time trying to change people's minds.

### **Putting Together a Voter Contact Program**

A strong voter-targeted contact program includes several elements. One is to remove unlikely voters from the campaign database and avoid contacting them. Instead, the focus should be on persuading undecided voters to support the referendum or bond issue and turning out "yes" voters on Election Day (Fairbank, 2006). Ingle et al. (2012) described a two-step approach to

planning a campaign that might help districts pass a referendum. This included a first campaign that successfully used the traditional strategies of a high-profile, high voter turnout campaign, and a second low-profile campaign designed to specifically target “yes” voters and rally them to the polls. The first campaign may be best described as a wide lens camera approach, whereas the second campaign is akin to a telescope that is much more specific in who is targeted and which seeks to quietly target yes voters in order not to provoke no voters (Ingle et al., 2012).

### **Getting Out the “Yes” Vote**

A central theme in all referendum campaigns is a focus on the “yes” voters (Holt et al., 2006; Johnson & Ingle, 2008).

Community leaders should play an instrumental role in securing yes votes in the election. Several sources note that the most important part of bond election campaigns is “getting yes voters to vote” (Hanover Research, 2012, p. 12). Targeted direct mail and automated phone calls will alert the “yes” and undecided voters about the election. Other methods included assisting with voter registration, especially of the first-time 18-year old voters as well as newcomers to the community; seeking support of college-age students from the community by encouraging them to vote through absentee ballots; telephone reminders by campaigners; and direct mail to all potential “yes” voters the day before the vote takes place (Hanover Research, 2012). While focusing on the campaign’s message, these means of voter contact are informational and can motivate voters to get to the polls (Fairbank, 2006). The attention of the campaigners should be on “yes” voters. Rather than trying to change the minds of “no” voters, proponents should concentrate on getting “yes” voters to the polls and convincing the undecided to vote “yes” (Holt et al., 2006; Johnson & Ingle, 2008). Holt et al. (2006) reported:

Statistically, approximately 30% of voters oppose school district bond measures because they resent the public sector, are on fixed incomes, have no children, have no other personal incentive for schools to be successful, or for any number of other reasons.

Districts cannot afford to waste their effort or attempt to convert the entrenched no vote.

(p. 13)

Johnson and Ingle (2008) also found that school districts focused on the “yes” vote were 7.6 times more likely to have their levies pass. One of the most important themes that emerged from the study by Johnson and Engle was having specific and intentional strategies for getting positive voters to the polls (Stauffacher, 2012).

Although the above strategies are not comprehensive of all strategies school districts can integrate into their campaigns, they provide a framework that districts can use as they wade through the murky waters of the referendum process. Unfortunately, most researchers (Holt et al., 2006) have acknowledged that each school referenda or bonding issue is as unique as is the community in which it is up for vote. The norms, values, and culture of the community influence which factors, including ones discussed in this review, are most critical.

### **Summary**

The most important strategies of a passing or failing bond election or referendum have been identified by several educational researchers including Ingle et al. (2009), Johnson and Ingle (2008), Holt et al. (2006), Holt (2002), Fairbank (2006), Hanover Research (2012), Bowers et al. (2013), and Holt and Lee (2013). These strategies included (a) surveying likely voters, (b) getting the school board’s support, (c) crafting a winning message, (d) educating the media, (e) identifying supporters, (f) building a campaign organization, (g) creating a campaign timeline, (h) developing a fundraising plan, (i) putting together a voter contact program, and (j) getting out

the vote. These strategies, along with a brief historical summary of several midwestern states and their accompanying school referenda processes, were presented as well as a more in-depth perspective to the current historical referenda history in the State of Indiana since 2008.

Other factors pertaining to school bond elections and referenda were also reviewed. These included the linkage between student attitudes, teacher attitudes, economic factors, the current state of facilities of schools in the U.S, student achievement as it relates to school facilities, demographics, age subpopulations, and SES. These factors were integrated into the interview sessions and analyzed to seek any relationships with passage or failure rates.

The nature of school referendums is a complicated topic as most research has shown that it can be very state- or district-specific (Bowers et al., 2009). However, in all states, school administrators are faced with daunting decisions regarding student achievement and student learning, having to choose between student achievement and instruction and maintaining school facilities while providing the necessary instructional materials and personnel to achieve their goals. School leaders at times find it necessary to turn to their local voters to raise revenues to address the school corporation's growing population, changes in demographics, and instructional needs.

Before bringing a referendum to the voters, school district leaders are encouraged to create a thorough and well thought out plan, with careful consideration of how it will impact the community and how it will be voted on (Clemons et al., 2010). Passage or failure of school referenda hinge upon many critical factors. Before entering into a school bond election, the creation of a diverse community task force to answer all questions while relying on factual evidence is one of the most cited and recommended practices (Hanover Research, 2012). Unfortunately, Indiana does not have years of historical or longitudinal data on the school

referendum process, and most superintendents and school boards are novices in the strategies and variables influencing the referendum process. Due to the limited number of referendums and the short time the current process has been in place, superintendents have little to no statistical knowledge of the specific relationships that have been tested or observed. National data is available albeit the processes for each state regarding referendums are different. On the topic of passage of school referendums in Indiana, no specific relationships have been proven or thoroughly analyzed.

Chapter 2 described strategies found to have a positive relationship on the passing of a school referendum. Fairbank (2006), Holt (2002), and Ingle et al. (2009) noted 10 specific strategies that assist a school district in passing referenda. The list included (a) surveying likely voters, (b) getting the school board's support, (c) crafting a winning message, (d) educating the media, (e) identifying supporters, (f) building a campaign organization, (g) creating a campaign timeline, (h) developing a fundraising plan, (i) putting together a voter contact program, and (j) getting out the vote (Fairbank, 2006; Holt et al., 2006; Ingle et al., 2009). It is important to remember that this is not a comprehensive list of strategies and that referendum passage can be unique to the district at hand and a case-by-case basis. Each referendum comes at a different cost to taxpayers, at a different time, and for a different reason. Strategies and factors that allowed a school district in one locale to pass a referendum may bring forth a very different outcome in another locale due to community norms, cost, or other factors. The intent of the specific research questions asked in this study was to gain information from Indiana school districts that have experienced either a successful or failed referendum since 2008. Relationships between testimonial data and the data collected by the Center of Educational Policy (CEEP) since 2008 were also explored with use of both qualitative and quantitative data.

### CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter describes the methods and research design utilized in the study. A mixed-methods design study was used to gain qualitative and quantitative data on the topic of school referendums and variables were analyzed to explore which were related to successful referendum campaigns. Historical data of school referendums in Indiana since 2008 were analyzed to determine which factors had been associated with the passing or failing of school referendums. Qualitative data from local school superintendents was collected to allow for further examination of strategies that promote successful passage of school referendums as well as non-numeric variables some school districts must evaluate during school referendum campaigns. Factors including the SES of the community, age disparities, locale, the timing of the referendum, the type of referendum, and the tax rate increase were the primary independent variables analyzed.

Multiple regression analysis estimated the relationships of the independent variables to the dependent variable of this mixed-methods study, the passage of a school referendum. Additionally, other variables, including the number of referendums the school district had put forth since the referendum laws had changed in Indiana, as well the SES of the school district were analyzed.

As research on the referendum process in Indiana is still within the first decade of review since changes in referenda policy were enacted in 2008, empirical data are not plentiful and information and trends supporting successful strategies are still an area of ambiguity in Indiana. This study focused on Indiana school districts that had attempted to pass a school referendum since 2008 per the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy database (CEEP, 2019). This study also drew upon qualitative methods to explore in greater depth the referenda experiences of four school districts taken from the quantitative sample.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine which variables and factors most closely related to the passing or failing rates of referendums in Indiana school districts. This study investigated multiple variables and calculations that had been collected by CEEP in a database of Indiana School Referenda over the last ten years.

### **Research Questions**

The research study addressed the following two research questions:

1. Based upon data from the 2019 CEEP database, what factors and variables have the strongest statistical relationship to referendum passage or failure rates?
2. In school districts that passed or failed referendums in Indiana, what primary strategies did superintendents perceive as the most influential and critical for success or failure?

What internal political, social, and demographic factors did superintendents in Indiana determine as significant for successful referendums?

### **Rational for Research Questions**

The findings from the literature review put forth a myriad of strategies that had been found to have a relationship with a school district's ability to pass a school referendum. However, it is noted that several factors including the size of the district, the demographics of the districts, the socioeconomic viability of the district, the cost of the project, the proposed tax rate increase, the impediment of opposing community groups, and the level of support from school board officials can impact the passing of a general or construction-based referendum.

### **Research Design**

The research design of this study was a descriptive, mixed methods, non-experimental design that used multiple regression analysis to estimate the relationships of the predictive

variables (increased tax rates, locales of school districts, timing of school referendums, type of referendum) to the dependent variable of the successful passing of a school referendum. The study investigated archival data from the year 2008 on that had been collected by the 2019 CEEP Database of School Referendums in the State of Indiana. A multiple regression model was used to learn which variables had a statistically significant relationship to referendum passage. Multiple regression estimates the strength of relationships between independent and dependent variables. Additionally, qualitative methods including interviews and survey questions further explored non-numeric factors and variables that are present when school districts attempt to pass school referenda. Mixed methods research involves the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in response to research questions or hypotheses, includes the analysis of both forms of data, and integrates both forms of data into the design through merging the data, connecting the data, or embedding the data (Creswell, 2014). Within the social and behavioral sciences, a schism has existed for decades that separates the qualitative and quantitative research traditions. Recently, mixed methods approaches have emerged that offer the promise of bridging across both traditions (Castro et al., 2010). The mixing or blending of data provides a deeper understanding of the problem or question than can be achieved by either qualitative or quantitative by itself (Creswell, 2014). According to Castro et al. (2010),

The need exists for rigorous mixed methods designs that integrate various data analytic procedures for a seamless transfer of evidence across qualitative and quantitative modalities. Such designs can offer the strength of confirmatory results drawn from quantitative multivariate analyses, along with “deep structure” explanatory descriptions as drawn from qualitative analyses. (p. 343)

At the practical level, mixed methods provide a sophisticated, complex approach to research that appeals to those on the forefront of new research procedures and is ideal if the researcher has access to both quantitative and qualitative data. Finally, at the procedural level, it can be utilized as a promising strategy to generate a more comprehensive understanding of research problems (Creswell, 2014).

Figure 2

Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Diagram

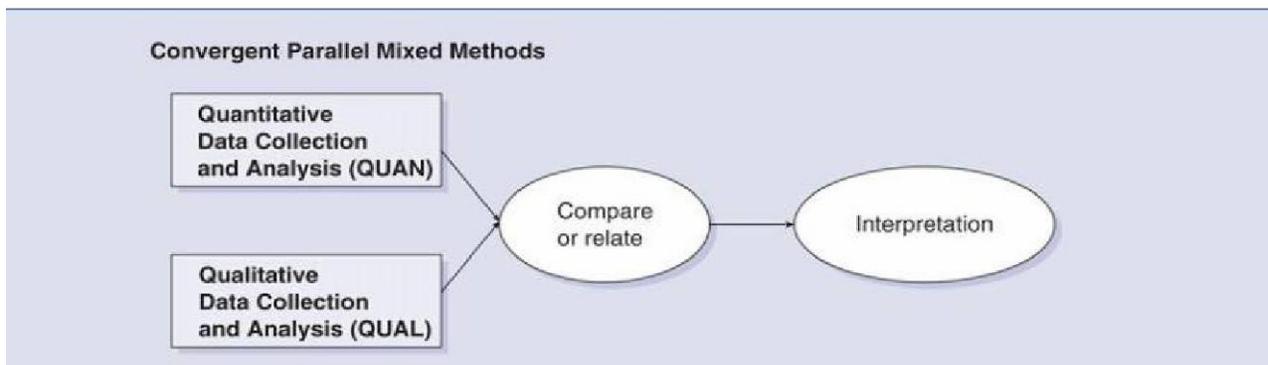


Figure 2: *Advanced Mixed Methods Designs (Creswell, 2014)*

In this study, a convergent parallel mixed methods design was utilized (See Figure 2). In this approach, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed simultaneously, then separately, and then the results were compared to see if the findings confirmed or disconfirmed each other. This approach assumes that each form of data provides a different type of information, such as a qualitative detailed account from a participant, which can be compared to scores on quantitative instruments; when combined, the data will yield similar results. Further, non-experimental results can be understood by incorporating the perspectives of individuals (Creswell, 2014). Other various mixed methods designs were rejected based upon the structure and data collection methods. The concurrent nature of the convergent parallel research design

allowed for data to be concurrently collected and analyzed before interpretation. The following sections explain the study's quantitative and qualitative methods in more detail.

### **Quantitative Data**

Quantitative research is an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically with instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2014). The strengths of quantitative approaches include the accurate operationalization and measurement of a specific construct, the capacity to conduct group comparisons, the capacity to examine the strength of association between variables of interest, the capacity for model specification, and the testing of research hypotheses methods (Castro et al., 2010). Using data from the 2018 CEEP database on school referendum passage rates, this study analyzed the variables of proposed tax rates, locales of the school district, timing of referendums, and the two different types of referenda.

### **Qualitative Data**

Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). According to Castro et al (2010), "qualitative approach examines the 'whole person' holistically within that person's natural environment—a fully *contextualized* approach." The process of research involves the researcher exploring for emerging questions and procedures; typically, collecting data in the participant's setting; analyzing data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014). Strengths of the qualitative approach include the capacity for generating richly detailed narrative accounts of human experiences (emotions, beliefs, and behaviors) that are examined within the original

context in which observations occurred. The data collected will not be numeric but instead “affords an in-depth analysis of complex human, family systems, and cultural experiences in a manner that cannot be fully captured with measurement scales and multivariate models” (Castro et al., 2010, p. 342).

Qualitative data was obtained from interviews with various superintendents in Indiana who had experienced the referenda process in their district in the last nine years. Survey questions related to other variables and factors associated with the passage of a school referendum were sent to four local school superintendents who recently had attempted a school referendum. This survey data provided the structure and questions for the interviews to make them more informational. Survey questions gave superintendents the opportunity to rank their perceptions of the magnitude of the relationships of various strategies and variables to passage or failure of school referendums in their districts. Survey data was gathered via email and then was analyzed and reviewed to investigate the strategies and variables the superintendents listed as having a positive or negative influence on their school’s referendum process.

Based upon each survey, interview questions were developed for each superintendent. Interviews with these superintendents further explored the factors associated with school referendum passage rates. It should be noted that some of the interview questions were consistently asked to each of the superintendents; however, based on their survey responses, specific questions were addressed to each superintendent. Each district seeking a referendum may have unique circumstances that could influence the qualitative data results. Further, although semi-scripted, the interview questions might evolve and need to be changed based on the survey data and interview sessions with each superintendent. Each superintendent surveyed and interviewed had been through multiple school referendums; hence, survey data alone might

not effectively capture the factors impacting each individual referendum. The survey served as an instrument to guide the interviews to garner deeper understanding of the referendum process the superintendents experienced during each referendum campaign.

Due to the nature of the research study, school districts were chosen based upon their previous involvement or history with school referendums in Indiana. I sought districts that had attempted multiple school referendums in the previous eight years. Further, districts with fewer than two failed or successful referendums were eliminated from the qualitative research portion of the study. Diversity in district demographics, locale, size, and ethnicities was also considered to establish a more comprehensive participant group. The sample was taken from districts that had referendums that occurred between 2008-2019. It is noteworthy that some districts had succeeded or failed multiple times during this time period while others had only gone through the referendum process once. Further, purposeful sampling was necessary to determine current superintendents who had led the school district during the referendum campaign. Four school district superintendents were contacted to provide survey data and testimonial data about the referendum process; they were also asked to participate in qualitative interview sessions to gain a deeper understanding of the district's referendum history and process.

Sample size in this study created a potential issue, however it was determined that the most appropriate approach was to not consider the unequal sample sizes of the qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data to be detrimental. According to Creswell (2014), "one can argue that the intent of qualitative and quantitative research differ as one is to gain an in-depth perspective while the other is to generalize to a population and each provides an adequate count." (p. 276). Finally, the superintendents who took part in the qualitative data collection were also part of the quantitative sample. Typically, mixed methods researchers include the

qualitative participants in the larger quantitative sample as ultimately a comparison can be made between responses collected from the two samples (Creswell, 2014).

The CEEP 2019 database was used to determine which Indiana school districts had put forth referendums since 2008 and to identify school districts with a diverse range on multiple variables including size, student population, and locale. I sought to find two districts that had passed a minimum of two referendums and two or more districts that had failed at passing two referendums. Additionally, districts were chosen that were diversified in demographics, student population, SES, and the number of failed or passed referendums experienced in the last eight years. The following districts were selected for this study: Black Oak Schools, Hamilton Schools, Rushmore Schools, and Henry Schools (See Table 2 <sup>1</sup>)

Table 2. Sample District Demographics

<i>District</i>	<i># Students</i>	<i>Demographics</i>	<i>Locale</i>	<i>SES %P/F/R</i>	<i>Passed</i>	<i>Failed</i>
Black Oak	7301	83 W, 17 M	Suburb	P 94.4, F/R 5.6	4	1
Hamilton	16, 328	27.4W, 64.4M	City	P 32.0, F/R 68	2	0
Rushmore	3016	69.5 W, 30.5 M	Rural	P 36.3, F/R 63.7	2	1
Henry	1794	45.7W, 54.3 M	City	P 40.4, F/R 59.6	2	0

*Note: Indiana Department of Education (2019)*

<sup>1</sup> Black Oak, Hamilton, Rushmore and Henry are pseudonym names for the school districts

Each of these districts is located in the greater Indianapolis area. For the purpose of this study, I utilized two state and local agencies to derive the needed selection criteria, including which Indiana School Districts had been through the referendum process since 2008 and which of these

districts had been successful as opposed to those who had failed. Table 2 presents the districts used for the quantitative survey portion of the study as well as the qualitative interviews and case studies.

Each of the aforementioned school districts had gone to the voters a minimum of two instances, with two of the districts going through the referendum process five times. Additionally, they were chosen specifically due to successes and failures in the referendum process. They also varied in the types of referendums they sought, as both general fund and construction referendums had been attempted. It should be noted that these districts ranged in size from almost 10,000 students to 3,016 students, represented different locales as defined by CEEP, and the SES of these districts varied by nearly 50 percentage points in the number of students who received free/reduced lunch services compared to those who paid. Additionally, two of the four districts had succeeded and failed in referendums in the past eight years and had attempted both general fund and construction type referendums.

### **Phase One: Quantitative Methods and Analysis**

#### **Analysis of CEEP database**

This section describes the sample, data collection methods, instrumentation, and analysis for the quantitative methods section of the study. It discusses data from the 2018 CEEP Database on school referendums.

#### **Sample**

The sample in my study was primarily derived from the CEEP (Center for Education and Evaluation Policy) database of school referenda in Indiana. The database tracked the passing rates of all school referenda from the years 2008 to 2019. Multiple variables from the CEEP database were analyzed including the type of referendum, the year of the referendum, the locale

of the school district, the time of passage or failure, the minimum tax rate, the percentage of passing and failing referenda, and in most cases the total amount of the referendum project. Referendum passing and failing rates are tracked annually and the database had been updated to include the number of referendum elections during the current year.

The website Proximity One ([http://proximityone.com/sd\\_in.htm](http://proximityone.com/sd_in.htm)) was used to gather, assimilate, and record all demographic variables for Indiana School Districts that had put a referendum before voters since 2008. The ranking tables in Proximity One provided selected demographic characteristics for Indiana school districts. These data were derived from the American Community Survey 2009 5-year estimates released December 2010. These are the first "richer demographics" for all school districts released since the 2000 Census. Data reflected school district geographic boundaries for the 2009-10 school year. Due to the timing of the 2020 Census, these data were the most accurate and reliable source of school district demographics. Variables extrapolated from this data source included community and school district population, median age of community, percentage of homes with school-aged children, percentage of homes with individuals over 65, percentage of high school and college graduates, and the median housing value.

The Indiana Department of Education website was the third data source for my analysis. School data variables were extrapolated from multiple databases and imported into the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Variables included school population, percentage of white students in the school district, percentage of English-Language Learners in the school district, the average free and reduced population in a school district, the inter-district mobility of students in the school district, the passing rates of math and language arts in the school district, percentage of special education students in the school district, the graduation rate of the school

district, and the district's overall rating based on math and language arts scores. The most current data available from IDOE was from the 2018-2019 school year.

Historical information from the Fall 2019 CEEP database on school referendums was collected and analyzed. The CEEP database of school referendums houses data of all Indiana school referendums that have failed or passed since the onset of the current referendum process in 2008. The sample for the quantitative section was selected utilizing the CEEP database of schools that have attempted multiple school referendums since 2008. School superintendents were selected by analyzing Indiana Referendum Data and determining which superintendents were actively working in the district during the time of the referendums.

### **Data Collection**

The 2019 CEEP database provides data on all schools attempting referendums since 2008. This data can be filtered by locale, percentage passed or failed, school district, average tax increase, year, or type of referendum attempted. However, to date, no inferential statistical analysis to determine commonalities, variance, or possible trends has been performed.

### **Analysis**

CEEP data was exported to SPSS data analysis software. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were tabulated, and multiple regression between dependent and independent variables explored the relationships between these variables. The dependent variable was the passing rate of school referenda. The independent variables included the proposed tax rates, locales of the school districts, timing of the referendum, and the type of school referendum. The linear regression technique called ordinary least squares (OLS) was utilized in an attempt to explain variation in the dependent variable with the multiple independent variables and their associated relationships.

## **Phase 2: Qualitative Analysis**

### **Sample**

Four district superintendents were interviewed to provide further information on their perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies used in the referendum process, from beneficial to detrimental, depending on if the district was successful or not. During these in-person visits, the individuals were also interviewed to garner deeper understanding of the referendum process in the district, to hear testimonials about specific strategies and variables associated with the passage or failure of the referendum, and to learn more about the culture and population of their district holistically. Lastly, interviews attempted to delve into political or other unique factors associated with the overall referendum process in their respective districts.

### **Instrumentation**

The innovative-decision theory framework has five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Each of these stages has relevance to the referendum process as well as to the four elements of innovation: the innovation itself, the communication methods used to spread information about the innovation, the time, and the type society into which it was integrated. Data from the completed surveys guided the interviews with each superintendent and allowed the researcher to reference the aforementioned stages through dialogue and questions. The referendum process has underpinnings in educating the community and persuading taxpayers and voters to understand and support the decision of the school district to put forth a referendum. Referendums in Indiana must go to voters in elections which creates a decision-making process. Further, a deeper understanding of the implementation and confirmation stages was gained by discussing outcomes of successful referenda in the years

following their passage. Issues of timing, communication methods, the need of the referendum, and the nature of the community and its associated norms provided depth to the findings.

Superintendents completed a survey that listed 26 possible factors or strategies which had a positive relationship on passing the referendum (See Appendix 1). These questions were tailored to fit the needs of the study in Indiana but were based on previous research by Johnson and Ingle (2012) and Holt et al. (2009) which had identified factors that positively influenced the passage rates of school referendums. A five-point Likert scale was used to rate how each of the 26 factors influenced passage of referenda: 1 = No positive influence, 2 = very little positive influence, 3 = some positive influence, 4 = strong positive influence, and 5 = very strong positive influence (See Appendix 1). Interviews questions paralleled the questions on the survey instrument used in the quantitative design of the study. Interviews also included open-ended questions and brought forth more in-depth questions based on the survey responses. Additional questions gathered information about the culture of the school district, the political landscape of the community, relevant historical information or knowledge, and any other unique characteristics of the school district which could influence decisions to vote for or against a referendum. Several open-ended questions allowed survey participants to list any unique factors including local control issues and local politics that contributed to the passage or failure of their particular referendum.

### **Data Collection**

Superintendents from four districts that had put forth a referendum since 2008 were asked to identify the primary strategies utilized during the referendum campaign that influenced the outcome of their district's referendum. The survey and interviews were administered to superintendents who worked in a district after a general or construction referendum was placed

on the ballot for voters. The range of time since the referenda had been put to voters spanned nine years. The questions were designed to allow superintendents an opportunity to highlight strategies or factors they perceived as most beneficial to successful referendums as well as any impediments and obstacles they encountered. School district superintendents were contacted by email requesting them to respond to various strategies regarding the past referendum in their school district.

Responses from the survey shaped the individual interviews with each superintendent. Due to the limited number of surveys the data extracted from them would be inconsequential holistically. However, the purpose of the survey was to tailor each interview, allowing me to ask specific questions on topics identified and also to begin deductive analysis of common themes that naturally developed during the interviews. Survey data informed discovery of initial trends or factors that superintendents had found to be influential as well as ones they believed had little influence on the outcome of the referendums in their district. Superintendents had varying experience with referenda, and in some cases, they had been through multiple referendums during their tenure. Questions were asked to ascertain perspectives, changing trends between referendums, and other factors that potentially had influenced the passage or failure of each referendum. Interview protocols were guided by the survey data from each superintendent. Some baseline questions were asked of all participants. Interviews were used to discover new data, further develop existing data, and assist in organizing all data sources.

### **Analysis**

After the interviews had been conducted, the data were used to answer the qualitative research questions of the study and were compared to previous quantitative data to begin to discern commonalities and differences. Data collected included the number of years the

superintendent had been at the district, more in-depth information regarding the strategies the superintendents perceived as effective for referendum success, historical knowledge of the district, unique characteristics of the demographics of the district, and reasoning behind the referendum projects. Further, superintendents provided insight into potential pitfalls and challenges their district had faced in the referendum process. Lastly, superintendents were asked to recommend strategies and factors that should be considered before attempting referendum projects in Indiana.

To analyze and better understand the information gained from the four superintendents it was important to identify the major concepts and themes that evolved and to group them by themes and attributes. To avoid any preconceived bias about the research findings, open coding procedures were used (Creswell, 2014). Open coding is an inductive approach which categorizes new findings or patterns that emerge from the interviews. This is important since each interview has the potential to elicit unique and possibly new concepts not previously encountered. Deductive coding analysis (DCA) was also used to analyze interview findings. DCA allows the researcher to begin with a theory or series of theories regarding strategies believed to affect school referendums and then to use the DCA model to analyze the interview results. A basic premise in deductive qualitative analysis is that researchers often have theories they think will help them to focus their research questions (Gilgun, 2010). The survey each superintendent filled out listed research-based strategies that school districts had used in successful referendums. Several of the more frequently noted strategies were put through deductive coding to observe their relevance and prevalence in the referendum campaigns of the school districts in my research. The areas of interest for deductive coding purposes included the use of central office campaigns, absolute support of the school board, the use of community campaigns, message

training for members of committee and school officials, creation of a list of potential cuts if the referendum did not pass, neighborhood canvassing, employing a campaign consultant, displaying campaign signs in the community, getting out the vote strategies, sending reminders to voting bodies, and the use of short versus long campaign strategies.<sup>2</sup> The strategies that had been used by superintendents from districts that had failed on their first referendum attempt but later succeeded were analyzed and compared to discover common strategies. Open and deductive coding organized the data to allow for deeper analysis. A table of categories of similar factors and variables listed by superintendents as positive influences on the passing of their districts' school referendums was created and evaluated concurrently with CEEP data on referendum

### **Ethical Considerations**

Each of the participants in the survey and interview portions of this research study was contacted and given the opportunity to participate based on a purposive sample. In the initial invitation on the survey, information was shared explaining that this was a purposive sample due to the fact that only school districts that had attempted a referendum were targeted and contacted. All personally identifiable information was kept confidential and all information will be shared with all participating districts once the study is concluded. The purpose of this study was to inform school districts and their superintendents and personnel of the most successful referendum strategies and techniques should their district attempt a referendum in the near future.

Risk was minimized during the study by making all personally identifiable information confidential without being published or retained after the study. It is my intention to make the study findings available to superintendents in the state of Indiana and the Center for Education and Evaluation Policy as well as other educational agencies. passage strategies.

<sup>2</sup> 11 most common strategies from survey Appendix A.

### **Summary**

The research and design methods were summarized in chapter three. This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative data; it was designed to collect both forms of data using parallel variables, constructs, and concepts (Creswell, 2014). Four Indiana superintendents were surveyed and interviewed to explore their perceptions of the level of importance of various strategies in passing a referendum. Quantitative data were collected from the CEEP database and were organized to compare to other quantitative data sources (e.g., Census). Finally, data from the CEEP database were analyzed using multiple regression analysis to observe the strength of relationships between four independent variables and the dependent variable (passing school referendum).

In Chapter Four, qualitative data, including information from superintendent interviews, is analyzed and presented in conjunction with analysis of quantitative data from the CEEP database. The data is presented in various joint displays.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the results of the study. It is organized into multiple sections which include descriptions of the data sources and sample, the quantitative results, including regression models, and a summary. The models were organized by the different types of variables, including social, community, and referendum-based variables. The study explored any statistical differences found between multiple variables and their relationship with the dependent variable, the passing rate (at 50.01%) of school referendums in Indiana. One significant relationship to the dependent variable was found. That variable was the percentage of college graduates in the community. However, though not statistically significant, other notable relationships were also found.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand what variables and factors were associated with the passing or failing rates of referendums in Indiana school districts. This study investigated multiple community, school, and referendum-based variables in relation to passing rates over the last ten years. Additionally, this study attempted to better understand which of the strategies associated with the passage or failure of a school referendum were considered by Indiana school districts to be primary and secondary factors. The study investigated which strategies were positively and negatively related to the passage of referenda. The study also sought to determine which factors, if any, had a statistically significant relationship to the passage of referendums.

A secondary purpose of this descriptive study was to understand the effectiveness of factors and strategies surrounding the passage of school referendums in the State of Indiana. Each state in the United States has unique laws that outline the procedural measures school

districts must enact to begin the referendum process. Indiana is one of 14 states in the United States that does not use state funding for school construction projects thus leaving this burden to the local taxpayer through capital project and debt financing. Superintendents in Indiana must be prudent in learning about their community demographics, its voting history, as well as how school and referendum factors may influence the passing of referendums.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study.

1. Based upon data from the 2019 CEEP database, what factors and variables have the strongest statistical relationship to referendum passage or failure rates?
2. In school districts that passed or failed referendums in Indiana, what primary strategies did superintendents perceive as the most influential and critical for success or failure? What internal political, social, and demographic factors did superintendents in Indiana determine as significant for successful referendums?

### **Phase One: Quantitative Results**

#### **Sample**

Currently in Indiana there are 293 public school corporations. During the years 2008-2019, 117 school districts in Indiana put forth either a general or building referendum to the local electorate. Since 2008, there have been 198 school referendums. Prior to the end of the year in 2010, school districts did not have to hold referendums on a general or primary ballot, and 26 referenda took place before this time. Of the 198 school referendums, 120 (or 60.6%) were general referendums and 77 (or 38.9%) were construction. One school district held a bond refinancing referendum as well (1%). Overall, 124 (or 62.6%) of all school referendums have passed in Indiana since 2008. Of the 198 school referendums, 112 (or 56.6%) were conducted in May, with 80 or (40.4%) conducted in November. The remaining six referendums were held

outside the normal primary and general elections. Additionally, school referendums can be regarded by the type of locale of the school district. The four locales identified in Indiana are city, rural, town, and suburb. Suburb and rural school districts top out the frequency of school referendum proposals with 65 and 61 respectively, accounting for 63.6% of all school referendums. City districts followed with 47 (or 23.7%) school referendums, and districts that were town-based accounted for the fewest referenda, with 25 (or 12.6%). Further, the number of school referendums put forth per calendar year has ranged from 10 referendums in 2012 to 25 referendums in the years 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. Since 2008-2009, the mean number of school referendums per year has been 18.

The CEEP Database, as well as Indiana Department of Education, utilizes four locales to differentiate school district settings. The locales are city, rural, suburb, and town. Due to the geographical diversity in Indiana, each of these locales had a minimum of 25 referendums proposed by school districts. In terms of actual numbers, suburb and city locales are far less numerous than rural or town locales; however, the suburb and city locales are comprised of more school districts due to their higher population density. Rural districts make up the highest percentage of locales; but due to their lower density population and to the spacious nature of rural districts, fewer school districts exist. Suburb and rural locales put forth the largest numbers of total referendums, with 65 and 61 respectively, followed by cities proposing 47 and towns proposing 25 referendums (See Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Information about Indiana Referendums 2008-2019*

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Variable	N	%
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Type of Referendum		
General Fund	120	60.6
Operating Fund	77	38.9
School Levy	1	0.5
Total Referendums	198	100
Date of Referendum		
May	112	56.6
November	80	40.4
Other	6	3
Locale		
City	47	23.7
Rural	61	30.8
Suburb	65	32.8
Town	25	12.6
Passing Rate		
Not Passing	74	37.4
Passing	124	62.6
School Year		
2008-2009	17	8.6
2009-2010	25	12.6
2010-2011	25	12.6
2011-2012	11	5.8
2012-2013	10	5.1
2013-2014	14	7.1
2014-2015	19	9.6
2015-2016	17	8.6
2016-2017	20	10.1
2017-2018	18	9.1
2018-2019	22	11.1

### Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were presented measures of central tendency for the 19 independent variables used in the study (See Table 4). My intention was to create a list of variables that had a potential relationship with the passing rates of school referendums. Variables were grouped into three categories: social factors, school factors, and referendum conditions. Social factors included the variables of (a) population of the community, (b) the percent of voters with children

ages 5-17, (c) the percent of voters over the age of 65, (d) the median age of the community, (e) the percent of high school graduates, (f) the percent of college graduates, and (g) the median housing value of the school district. School factors included (a) the total enrollment of the school district, (b) the school rank, (c) the graduation rate, and (d) the inter-district mobility rate; additional school factors included the percentages of (e) white students, (f) free and reduced students, (g) ELL (English Language Learners) students, (h) special education students, and (i) the percentage of students passing both mathematics and language the previous year. Referendum conditions included the proposed tax rate and the maximum total dollar amount requested by the referendum.

Descriptive statistics were used to understand which variables were potentially associated with passing school referendums. The population range between the largest and smallest districts proposing a referendum was 312,764 persons, with the mean community of the district at 38,583 persons ( $SD=48,399.5$ ). The percent of voters with school-aged children ranged from 8.28% to 27.1% ( $M=18.67$ ,  $SD=2.83$ ), while the percent of the voter population aged over 65 ranged from 5.65% to 20.01% ( $M=12.4$ ,  $SD=2.79$ ). It should be noted that percentages of both of these variables were skewed by one district in Indiana being heavily populated by college students, which decreased the percentages of voters with children in the home and voters over the age of 65. The median age of the communities also exhibited signs of outlier data, with the median age ranging from 22.2 to 45 years old, with the average at 36.87 years ( $M=36.87$ ,  $SD=3.69$ ).

Other community-based factors including the percentages of high school and college graduated showed large disparities and ranges. These disparities were attributed to the diverse locales and geographic areas of Indiana and the nature of the various demographics. The level of education of the community has underpinnings in the SES of the community as well as other

economic factors such as the median housing value. The percent of high school graduates ranged from 35.2% to 97.8% (M=86.71, SD=7.489), while the percent of college graduates ranged from 4.8% to 73.9% (M=22.96, SD=14.37). The median housing value was \$135,041; and between communities, it ranged from \$65,000 to \$331,500. The mean tax rate was 0.3077.

**Table 4**

*Descriptive Statistics of Referendum Variables 2008-2019*

Variable	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
N=198					
Population	311566.00	1198.00	312764.00	38583.10	48399.56
School Age Populate	18.88	8.28	27.16	18.67	2.83
Population over 65	14.36	5.65	20.01	12.44	2.79
Median Age%	22.80	22.20	45.00	36.88	3.70
% High School Graduate	62.60	35.20	97.80	86.72	7.49
% College Graduate	69.10	4.80	73.90	22.97	14.38
Median Housing Value	268500.00	63000.00	331500.00	135041.21	48473.74
Maximum Total Amount	278000000.00	0.00	278000000.00	34874774.44	40318232.88
Tax Rate	1.19	0.00	1.19	0.31	0.20
TOTAL ENROLLMENT	33791.00	259.00	34050.00	6157.79	6065.32
% White	0.98	0.01	0.99	0.76	0.22
%F& R	0.83	0.05	0.88	0.43	0.21
ELL %	0.32	0.00	0.32	0.04	0.06
Special Education %	0.17	0.08	0.24	0.15	0.03
Both Math and ELA	0.78	0.14	0.91	0.60	0.19
Percent Pass Rank out of ~360	336.00	1.00	337.00	149.68	105.73
Grad. Rate	0.42	0.59	1.00	0.91	0.07
Inter-district mobility	0.17	0.02	0.19	0.08	0.04

### Passing Rates

Passing rates and associated percentages were analyzed using crosstabulation to discover relationships between multiple variables and the overall passing rate of school referendums.<sup>1</sup> Although they were not statistically significant, these variables provided information on percentages of passing rates for referendums. The variables included the type of referendum proposed, the time of the calendar year it was voted on by local voters, the locale in which the referendum was sought, and the year in which the referendum was sought. These percentage rates can be viewed in Table 5.

General and construction referendums in Indiana show different rates of passing. Of the 120 general referendums in Indiana, 82 (or 68.3%) passed when placed on the ballot. Construction or operating referendums passed at lower rates with only 41 of the 77 (or 53.2%) referendums passing. Analysis showed that 67.9% of referendums put forth in May passed compared to 55% put forth in November. Comparing the types of referendums that passed or failed during either the May or the November elections provided mixed results. General referendums passed at a rate of 73% in May elections as compared to 58.1% in November elections. Construction referendums passed at a rate of 57% in May as compared to a 50% passing rate in November. The six remaining referendums were not conducted during the primary or general elections in the given year; they passed at a 2:1 ratio, with four passing and two failing.

When observing passing rates by locale, city and suburb locales passed referendums at 70.2% and 67.7%, respectively; while rural and town locales passed referendums at 59% and

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<sup>1</sup> In this analysis, I have the entire population of referendums since 2008; however, I am still using inferential statistics for other states that use a similar referendum model to consider for generalization

44%, respectively. Further evaluation of passing rates by locale showed some disparity based on the type of referendum attempted by the school district. In rural and suburban locales, general referendums passed at rates of 71.1% and 78.0%, respectively, compared to rates of just 62.1% in cities and 41.7% in towns. Conversely, operating referendums had the most successful passing rate in the city locale at 83.3%. The other three locales experienced passing rates below 50% for operating referendums, with 39.1% of rural, 47.8% of suburbs, and 46.2% of towns passing their operating referendums.

**Table 5**

*Statistical Relationships of Discrete Variables*

Type of Referendum	N	N Passing	% Passing
<b>Total of 198 School Referendums</b>			
<b>Type of Referendum</b>			
General	120	82	68.3%
Operating	77	41	53.2%
School Levy	1	1	100%
Total	198	124	62.6%
<b>Time of Referendum</b>			
May	112	78	67.9%
November	80	44	55%
Other	6	4	66.7%
<b>Locale</b>			
City			
General	29	18	62.1%
Operating	18	15	83.3%
Total	47	33	70.2%
Rural			
General	38	27	71.1%
Operating	25	9	39.1%
Total	61	36	59%
Suburb			
General	41	32	78%
Operating	23	11	47.8%
School Levy	1	1	100%
Total	65	44	67.7%
Town			
General	12	5	41.7%

Operating	13	6	46.2%
Total	25	11	44%

The chi-square test of independence was used to see whether the proportions of one variable were different for different values of the other variable (See Table 6). Using cross-tabulation analysis, four variables including the type of referendum, the date of referendum, the locale of the district, and the year of the referendum, were compared against the dependent variable, the passing rate. Chi-square statistics were computed and gave non-significant values for three of the variables including the type of referendum,  $\chi^2 (2, N=198) = 4.907, ns$ ; the date of the referendum (May vs. November),  $\chi^2 (2, N=198) = 5.161, ns$ ; and the locale of the district,  $\chi^2 (3, N=198) = 5.914, ns$ . The Chi-square value computed for the year of the referendum,  $\chi^2 (10, N=198) = 30.043$ , was statistically significant at the  $p < .01$  level.

**Table 6**

*Chi Square Values for Cross-Tabulation of Discrete Variables*

Variable	N	df	Chi-Square
Type of Referendum	198	2	4.907
May or November	198	2	5.161
Locale of district	198	3	5.914
Year of Referendum	198	10	30.043**

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).\*\*

Independent t-test analysis was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the means of two or more unrelated groups. The t-test essentially does two things. First, it determines if the means are sufficiently different from each other to say that they belong to two distinct groups. Second, the t-test takes in account the variability in scores of the two groups. (T-Test, <https://www.alleydog.com/glossary/definition-cit.php?term=T-Test>).

T-tests were computed for the same discrete variables of type of referendum, date of referendum, locale of referendum, and year of referendum, as well as a fifth variable which looked at the first three years of referendums versus the next eight. Data from the t-test showed that two variables were significantly different. The variable entitled year of referendum and variable first three years were ( $t(-4.263) = .000, p < .01$ ) for year and ( $t(3.163) = .002, p < .01$ ). The other three variables, including the type of referendum ( $t(1.902) = .59, p < .05$ ), the date of the referendum ( $t(1.486) = .139, p < .05$ ), and the locale of the referendum ( $t(1.423) = .151, p < .05$ ), were not significantly different. Mean values are found in Table 7. Data entitled three-year data presented a noteworthy difference in mean averages between the first three years of referendums versus the next 8 years. The last nine years had nearly a 10% higher mean value. These findings will be discussed in Chapter 5.

**Table 7***Means for Discrete Variables*

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Date			
May	112	56.78	17.15
November	80	52.95	15.91
Type			
General	120	57.12	16.77
Construction	77	52.02	15.88
Locale			
City	47	57.83	14.99
Rural	61	54.69	18.22
Suburban	65	56.56	15.92
Town	25	48.2	16.59

Year			
2008-2009	17	47.82	18.90
2009-2010	25	51.7	15.90
2010-2011	25	43.19	14.14
2011-2012	11	60.53	13.21
2012-2013	10	59.62	14.15
2013-2014	14	52.62	15.03
2014-2015	19	57.07	12.15
2015-2016	17	58.48	18.53
2016-2017	20	67.4	17.18
2017-2018	18	61.47	12.91
2018-2019	22	55.23	15.90
First Three Years			
2008-2011	67	49.81	15.86
2011-2019	120	59.03	15.64*

### **Correlation Statistics for Referendum Variables**

A correlation table was created to ascertain any possible relationships between the various variables. Of the 19 variables analyzed for correlation, seven variables showed a significant correlation with the testing variable “percent for.” “Percent for” was chosen as the testing variable and was set at 50.01%, as this is the minimum percent of yes votes that must be attained for a referendum to pass. Discussion and analysis of how these 19 variables interacted with multiple factors, including social, school, and referendum, to influence referendum passage rates follows.

#### **Social Factors**

For purposes of viewing the myriad of variables that had potential influence on referendum passage rates, I organized them into one of three categories. The first and largest category included social/community variables. Four of the variables categorized as social variables showed a statistically significance relationship to the variable “percent of yes vote.” These four variables were the median age of the community, the percentage of college graduates

in the community, the overall population of the community, and the median housing value of the district. The percentage of college graduates had the strongest correlation with percent passing the referendum,  $r(196) = .00$ ,  $p < .01$ . The median age had the next highest correlation with referendum passage at  $r(196) = .002$ ,  $p < .01$ . The overall population of the community,  $r(196) = .003$ ,  $p < .01$ , and the median housing value,  $r(196) = .008$ ,  $p < .01$ , were the final two social variables that had a statistical significance with percent passing.

### **School Factors**

Two school factors produced significant statistical relationships in the study. The variables of the percentage of students identified as English Language Learners and the total enrollment of the school district showed positive relationships with the variable “percent for.” Total school enrollment had the highest correlation ( $r(196) = .002$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with the passing of the referendum and was the most significant variable in this sector. The variable of the percentage of English Language Learners had a statistically significant relationship ( $r(196) = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ) with passing referendums at the  $p < .05$  level.

### **Referendum Factors**

The final variable that showed a significant statistical relationship with the dependent variable was tax rate. Tax rate was the one referendum-based variable that showed any type of significant relationship. School districts propose an increase to the tax rate when putting forth any type of referendum and the tax rate indicates the increase in taxes. The variable of tax rate had a statistically significant correlation with referendum pass rate ( $r(196) = .041$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

**Table 8**  
*Correlation Table for Continuous Referendum Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
<b>Percent For</b>	1																	
<b>Population</b>	0.003*																	
<b>School Age</b>	0.240	0.022*																
<b>Over 65</b>	0.051	0.04*	0.000**															
<b>Median Age</b>	0.002*	0.000*	0.173	0.000*														
<b>HS Grad</b>	0.262	0.562	0.995	0.008*	0.001*													
<b>Coll. Grad</b>	0.000**	0.002*	0.177	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*												
<b>Median Housing</b>	0.008*	0.479	0.000**	0.000*	0.450	0.000*	0.000*											
<b>Max. Total Amt.</b>	0.104	0.000*	0.772	0.007*	0.002*	0.319	0.000*	0.020*										
<b>Tax Rate</b>	0.041*	0.000*	0.737	0.118	0.718	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.353									
<b>Enrollment</b>	0.002**	0.000*	0.976	0.000*	0.000*	0.105	0.000*	0.076	0.000*	0.000*								
<b>% White</b>	0.120	0.000*	0.099	0.234	0.000*	0.001*	0.507	0.005*	0.000*	0.390	0.000*							
<b>% F/R</b>	0.138	0.001*	0.000**	0.000*	0.039*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.726	0.001*	0.150	0.000*						
<b>% ELL</b>	0.022*	0.000*	0.388	0.167	0.000*	0.000*	0.867	0.024*	0.005*	0.849	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*					
<b>% Sped</b>	0.325	0.897	0.000**	0.000*	0.031*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.043*	0.430	0.02*	0.357	0.000*	0.060				
<b>% Passing M/LA</b>	0.838	0.001*	0.017*	0.006*	0.433	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.941	0.011*	0.340	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*			
<b>Rank</b>	0.051	0.001*	0.000**	0.000*	0.914	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.566	0.011*	0.354	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*		
<b>Grad. Rate</b>	0.763	0.004*	0.002**	0.011*	0.058	0.000*	0.097	0.000*	0.858	0.136	0.376	0.000*	0.000*	0.125	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	
<b>Mobility</b>	0.769	0.092	0.094	0.720	0.122	0.521	0.726	0.724	0.793	0.084	0.060	0.878	0.114	0.496	0.083	0.681	0.169	0.000**

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).\*

### **Bivariate Relationships**

Bivariate relationship analysis was conducted to examine relationships and any perceived statistical differences among the most common referendum factors in the study. The variables of the type of referendum, the date it was conducted, the locale, and the year were examined. From the years 2008-2019, there were 120 general referendums (60.6 %) proposed to voters, and 77 construction referendums (39%) were proposed. When examining the type of referendum, a clear pattern emerged. T-tests were used to analyze differences between the type of referendum and their associated passing rates. General referendums passed at a rate of 68.7% as compared to construction referendums passing at 53.2%. This difference of 15.5% is statistically significant based upon analysis of these two variables during the years 2008-2019 ( $T(2.148) = .033, p < .05$ ).

Passing rates of May referendums were compared to November referendums. Of the 198 referendums in the study, all but six were held in either May or November; thus, only the May and November referendums were analyzed. Of the 198 school referendums, 112 or 56.6% of all referendums were voted on in May, with 80 referendums or 40.4% voted on in November. The remaining six or 3% were voted for in other months. T-tests were calculated to ascertain any differences between the passing rate of referendums in May as compared to November. The passing rate for referendums in May was 67.9%, while the passing rate for November referendums was at an even 55%. Though not a strong enough relationship to be considered statistically significant ( $T(1.820) = .070, n.s.$ ), school districts were nearly 13% more successful in passing either general or construction referendums in May as compared to November.

In addition to the type of referendum and the timing of the referendum, T-tests were used to observe if any relationships existed in the type of locale where the 198 referendums were

proposed. Locale for this study represented the type of community in which the school district is geographically located. T-tests compared differences in the passing rates of each locale for referendums in general as well as for each type of referendum. Although statistical significance was not found between locales ( $T(1.991) = .117$ , n.s.), the analysis found that city and suburb districts had the highest passing rates at 70.2% and 67.6%, respectively. Rural locales followed, albeit nearly 8% lower at 59%; and town locales presented the lowest passing rates at 44%.

When examining the year of the referendum passing, a clear pattern emerged. In the first three years (2008-2011) of the new referendum policy, the passing rate was significantly lower than it was in the following years from 2011-2019 ( $T(108.189) = 3.169$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the first three years of referendums since 2008, passage rates were 49.1%. School districts had just shy of a 50/50 chance of passing any kind of referendum; the low rate of passage was potentially frustrating and angered local community voters as the districts appeared to not be in touch with local needs. From 2012-2019, passing rates were much more promising for school districts, with 73.3% pass rate for all school referendums proposed to voters during this time period.

### **Regression Analysis**

Regression analysis was performed using multiple models to ascertain relationships of variables that showed significant correlation with referendum passage rates. Variables were isolated in the aforementioned domains of community, school, and referendum sectors. Multiple models were performed to identify significance among variables within domains as well as across domains. The final regression model identified the seven variables that had a significant correlation with the outcome.

### **Community Models**

Multiple regression models were performed to analyze features of referendums categorized as community variables. Community variables were those most commonly linked to community-based measures, including various populations and housing values of the community. Each regression model was derived from multiple variables but was not inclusive of all community variables except for model 3. Each model attempted to estimate the relationship between the outcome variable (passing rate) and the community variables. The significance level and  $R^2$  were also computed.

### ***Model 1: Significant Community Variables***

The first regression model on community factors derived from the four variables that had statistical significance in the correlation model. These included the variables of population size ( $\beta = .121, p < .05$ ), median age ( $\beta = -.122, p < .05$ ), the percentage of college graduates ( $\beta = .220, p < .05$ ), and the median housing value ( $\beta = .031, p < .05$ ) in the community. When these variables were analyzed in isolation against the dependent variable (without other statistically significant variables in the school and referendum sectors), they did not provide evidence of statistical significance. The regression accounted for 12.4% of the variation in the percent of voters voting for the initiative ( $R^2 = .124$ ). This model was utilized to ascertain if significance and regression models would change once additional social variables were added or supplanted with different social variables.

### ***Model 2: All Community Variables***

The second community regression model incorporated all seven community variables in the study. This included the population of the community, the percentage of homes with school-aged children, the percentage of homes with persons over age 65, the median age in the district, the percentage of high school graduates, the percentage of college graduates, and the median

housing value of the district. Regression analysis showed no statistical significance for any of the seven community variables in relation to the outcome of percent voting to pass the referendum. The variable “percentage of college graduates in the district” ( $\beta = .306$ ,  $p < .05$ ) was the only marginal variable. The addition of the variable median housing value ( $\beta = .146$ ,  $p < .05$ ) contributed to the change in significance for college graduate percentage. This regression model, however, accounted for the highest variation (15%) in all models of the study ( $R^2 = .150$ ). The variables including (a) the population of the community, (b) the percentage of homes with school aged children, (c) the percentage of home with persons over age 65, (d) the median age percentage of the district, and (e) the percentage of high school graduates remained statistically non-significant.

### ***Model 3: Community Variables***

The third community regression model integrated all community variables in the study with the exclusion of the median housing value in the district. This included the population of the community, the percentage of homes with school-aged children, the percentage of home with persons over age 65, the median age percentage of the district, the percentage of high school graduates, and the percentage of college graduates. Regression analysis illustrated a statistical significance in the variable of percentage of college graduates ( $\beta = .431$ ,  $p < .05$ ) The regression accounted for 14.5 % of the variation in the percent who voted to pass the initiative ( $R^2 = .145$ ). The percent of college graduates presented as the only significant variable in the model. None of the other community variables were statistically significant. It is noteworthy that the variable of college graduate percentage had a .431 effect size in this model, indicating this variable was strongly related to the passing rate.

### ***Model 4: Income-Based Community Variables***

This model was utilized to calculate community variables that were most closely linked with education and salary level of the district. These variables were not inclusive of all community variables but were chosen due to their common association with social success including education and income. The percentages of high school and college graduates (in the voting district) and the median housing value were calculated in relation to the outcome of percent of voters voting for the referendum. The regression accounted for 12.4% of the variation in the percent of votes for the initiative ( $R^2 = .124$ ). The percentages of high school graduates ( $\beta = -.226$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and college graduates ( $\beta = .511$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were statistically significant predictors of passing rate. This model provided an interesting observation. The percentage of high school graduates was significant; however, it was negatively related to the dependent variable (passing rate). This could lead one to believe that districts with higher rates of high school graduation would be less likely to pass a referendum. Conversely, the effect size and significance of college graduate percentage of the community was again impactful. This caveat will be explored in chapter 5.

### **School Models**

Multiple regression models were performed to analyze features of referendums categorized as school variables. Each regression model was derived from multiple variables but was not inclusive of all school variables except for model 6. School variables were those most closely related to various demographics within a school district including percentages of student subgroups and achievement factors of Indiana Schools. Each model attempted to estimate the relationship between the outcome variable (passing rate) and the school variables. The significance level and  $R^2$  were also computed. School variables were identified as those most

commonly linked to school-based measures including various student populations and academic achievement rankings and percentages.

***Model 5: Significant School Variables***

The first regression model on school factors derived from the two school-based variables that had statistical significance in the correlation model. These included the number of students in the district (total enrollment) and the percentage of English Language Learners in the district. When these variables were analyzed in isolation against the dependent variable (without other statistically significant variables in the community and referendum sectors), the variable of total enrollment was found to have statistical significance. The variable of English language learners was not significantly related to passing of the referendum. The regression accounted for only 5.5% of the variation in the percent of voters voting for the initiative ( $R^2 = .055$ ). This model was utilized to ascertain if significance and regression models would change once additional school variables were added or supplanted with different school variables. The variable of total enrollment was linked to the size of the community-at-large as larger communities have larger school populations.

***Model 6: All School Variables***

This regression model analyzed all of the variables categorized as school variables. These variables included the total enrollment of the school district (number of students), the percentage of white students (non-minority) in the district, the percentage of free and reduced, the percentage of English Language Learners, the percentage of special education students in the district, the combined passing percentage (Math and Language), the district rank (out of 360 Indiana Schools), the graduation rate, and the inter-district mobility rate. The regression accounted for 13.3% of the variation in the percent of voters voting for the initiative ( $R^2 = .133$ ).

The variables of ELL percent ( $\beta = .213, p < .05$ ), percent passing both math and ELA exams ( $\beta = -.237, p < .05$ ), and the district rank ( $\beta = -.311, p < .05$ ) were statistically significant. This model was used to analyze educational factors of Indiana Schools and how they related to referendum passage rates. In this model, the variable of total enrollment did not show statistical significance. Two of the statistically significant variables were associated with academic achievement and will be explored in the next model.

### ***Model 7: Academic-Based School Variables***

The third regression model on school factors derived from academic-based variables. The percentage of students passing both math and language arts state exams, the school rank, and the graduation rate are examples of academic metrics used by Indiana Schools to gauge academic success. These variables derive from data reported by the Department of Education regarding assessments taken in Indiana schools each year. Two of these variables showed statistical significance when placed in a regression model with the dependent variable, the passing rate of referendums. The percentage of students passing both math and language assessments ( $\beta = -.266, p < .05$ ) and the school system ranking of Indiana Schools ( $\beta = -.369, p < .01$ ) were both statistically significant when isolated in this model. The variable of graduation rate was not significant. The regression accounted for 5.4% of the variation in the percent who voted for the initiative ( $R^2 = .054$ ). Interestingly, both significant variables in this model had a negative relationship with the dependent variable of percent who voted for a referendum. However, this observation is noteworthy as it presents an inverse logic to the negative relationship. The higher the ranking of school district actually illustrated lower academic performance. Conversely, the variable of percent passing both math and language assessments did not follow this same trend. A common perception of voters and community members is to associate higher test scores and

school rank with an affluent community and one with fewer free and reduced students. This topic will be explored later in my analysis.

### **Referendum Factors**

The third component of the regression analysis focuses on the referendum factors of the study in relation to the dependent variable of percent for voters. Referendum factors were determined by observing variables that are most closely associated with the financial aspects of the referendum process as well as the referendum process in general in Indiana. The date and type of referendum, the associated cost of the proposals and tax rate that would be enacted and the year and locale (type of community) are the referendum variables for this study. Previously raw percentages were presented to show trend data and demographic patterns in previous referendums. The focal point will be to observe these variables in regression models using a couple to all referendum factors.

### ***Model 8: All Referendum Variables***

The first referendum model included the following variables that depicted features of referendums: the maximum amount (in dollars), tax rate, type of referendum (general or construction), the date of the referendum (May or November), the locale (type of community including rural, suburban, town, and city), and the year the referendum was placed before voters. The regression accounted for 13.8% of the variation in the percent of voters for the initiative ( $R^2 = .138$ ). The variables of maximum total amount ( $\beta = .150$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the year of the referendum ( $\beta = .274$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were statistically significant. The tax rate was marginal with a significance of .056. The variables of locale, the type of referendum, and the date of the referendum were not significant. The  $R^2$  for this model was the highest of all referendum regression models in the study.

***Model 9: Referendum Variables***

This regression model included variables that depicted features of referendums, including the maximum amount (in dollars), the tax rate, the type of referendum (construction vs. operations), the date of the referendum (May or November), and the year the referendum was placed before voters. The variable of locale was removed from this model to observe any statistical variations in the other referendum variables. The regression accounted for 13.4% of the variation in the percent voting for the initiative ( $R^2 = .134$ ). The variables of maximum total amount ( $\beta = .165$ ,  $p < .05$ ), tax rate ( $\beta = -.146$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and the year ( $\beta = .272$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were statistically significant. Maximum total amount and tax rate were the two variables that voters most commonly referred to and used in decisions that impacted the passing or failing of the initiative.

***Model 10: Referendum Variables (Voters)***

To isolate the two metrics most commonly associated with school referendums in Indiana, the variables of maximum total amount and tax rate were analyzed against the dependent variable. These two variables were associated with all referendum projects as they are reported to voters before elections transpire. Ultimately, the constituent is voting on passing or failing the total cost of the project or referendum. When looking at these two variables in isolation in regression analysis, neither variable was considered statistically significant. Conversely, the variable of tax rate was marginally significant ( $p = .051$ ). It is noteworthy that in isolation these variables were not significant; however, when analyzed among and with other referendum variables, significance levels altered.

***Model 11: Referendum Variables (Cost, Type, and Date)***

To isolate one of the financially grounded metrics most commonly associated with school referendums in Indiana, the variable of maximum total amount, as well as the type of referendum and the date of the referendum were analyzed against the dependent. The maximum total amount of the referendum is typically the number most voters associate with the project; with the other being the tax rate. Indiana currently allows for referendums to be conducted at any time of the year; however, all but six referendums have been held in either the May or November elections since 2009. As of 2020, there is current legislation proposing that referendums can only be placed before voters in November. The regression accounted for 5.2% of the variation in the percent of voters voting for the initiative ( $R^2 = .052$ ). When looking at these three variables in isolation in the regression analysis, both the type of referendum ( $\beta = -.185$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the maximum total amount ( $\beta = .189$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were found to be statistically significant. The date of the referendum was not significant.

***Model 12: Referendum Variables with Median Age %***

The variables of maximum total amount, the type of referendum, the tax rate, the date of the referendum, the type of referendum, and the median age of the community were analyzed against the dependent variable to discover significance. To observe any changes in significance levels of some of the common referendum variables, median age was added to the model as the only non-referendum variable. The regression accounted for 9.4% of the variation in the percent of voters voting for the initiative ( $R^2 = .094$ ). When looking at these five variables in isolation in the regression analysis, only the median age was statistically significant ( $\beta = .177$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The variables of the date and type of referendum as well as tax rate and maximum total amount were not found to be statistically significant.

***Model 13: Referendum Variables (Type and Date)***

Two variables associated with school referendums are the type of referendum (general vs. construction) and the date of the referendum. Aforementioned data showed that historically referendums were nearly 12% more likely to pass in May elections than in November elections. These two variables were isolated in the regression model against the dependent percent of passing rate. The model showed that neither the type of referendum nor the date of referendum was statistically significant.

***Final Regression Model: Regression of all Significant Variables***

Seven independent variables, including the population of the community, the median age, the percentage of college graduates in the community, the median housing value, the tax rate of the referendum, the total enrollment of the school district, and the percent of English language learners in the district, were found to have a statistically significant correlation with the outcome variable, passing rate. A regression model was then used to ascertain which variables had the strongest statistical relationship to the dependent variable, the percent who voted to pass the referendum. The coefficients table shows that when examined by regression analysis, only the percentage of college graduate in a community was considered statistically significant ( $\beta = .269$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The six other variables deemed significant based on correlation did not show statistical significance when examined by regression.

The remainder of Chapter 4 discusses the results of the qualitative analysis. The qualitative data provides more in-depth information from experienced superintendents in Indiana. The use of survey data, as well as data from interviews, is reviewed and compared to the quantitative data.

**Table 9**

*List of all Regression Variables from Social, School, and Referendum Analysis*

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12	Model 13	Model 14
May vs. June								.420 (-.055)	.438 (.053)		.270 (-.078)	.300 (-.072)	.324 (-.071)	
Type of Referendum								.233 (.091)	.185 (.100)		.015* (-.072)	.071 (.138)	.103 (-.117)	
Locale								.308 (-.072)						
Year								.000*** (.274)	.000*** (.272)					
Population	.110 (.121)	.179 (.104)	.264 (.083)											.110 (.283)
School Age Pop.		.254 (-.104)	.128 (-.085)											
Population over 65		.453 (.093.)	.647 (.054)											
Median Age	.122 (-122)	-.384 (-.118)	.634 (-.058)									.014* (.177)		.266 (-.094)
HS Grad %		.175 (-.170)	.131 (.187)	.017* (-.226)										
College Grad %	.090 (.220)	.078 (.306)	.000*** (.431)	.006** (-.511)										.045* (.269)
Median Housing	.803 (.031)	.311 (.146)		.525 (-.069)										.772 (.036)
Max Amount								.045* (.150)	.024* (.165)	.132 (.167)	.012* (.189)	.105 (.125)		
Tax Rate								.056 (-.133)	.034* (-.146)	.051 (-.138)		.088 (.119)		.466 (-.054)
School Population					.017** (-.184)	.75 (.153)								.187 (.248)
White %						.846 (-.023)								
F/R %						.161 (.223)								
ELL%					.263 (.086)	.024* (.213)								
Special Ed %						.325 (.082)								.143 (.120)
Pass Math/LA %						.035* (-.237)	.10** (-.266)							
School Rank						.279 (-.311)	.002** (-.369)							
Grad Rank						.962 (-100)	.838 (-.053)							
Inter. Mobility														
Constant	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***	.000***
R <sup>2</sup>	.124	.150	.134	.124	.055	.133	.052	.138	.134	.032	.052	.094	.021	.141
Observations	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198

Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05,

## **Phase Two: Qualitative Data**

### **Sample**

The sample for the qualitative analysis consisted of four school superintendents who had been serving as superintendent during the times of both passing and failing referendums. For the study, the pseudonyms of Mr. Lincoln, Mr. Washington, Mr. Jefferson, and Mr. Adams were used. Mr. Lincoln served a large and urban district with over 16,000 students. More than 60% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch (as a proxy for poverty). He had been involved in multiple referendums that had passed and one that had failed. Before becoming superintendent, he had served as an assistant superintendent and a teacher in the district. Mr. Washington served a very diverse district in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status; however, the student population was only just over 2,000 students. He had successfully organized multiple successful referendums since becoming superintendent. He had previously functioned as an assistant superintendent in a large, urban district and as a superintendent of a much smaller, rural district. Mr. Jefferson served an affluent district with less than six percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Having endured six both passing and failing referendums, he had the most experience with referendums. He had worked as an assistant superintendent before assuming this position. His district was a growing, suburban district. Lastly, Mr. Adams served a smaller and economically challenged district with a free and reduced lunch population greater than 50%. He had served as an assistant superintendent for multiple years before becoming superintendent of the city-based school. He had been on the campaigns of both failing and passing referendums. Each of the four superintendents was experienced with the referendum process and had been involved in referendum campaigns within the last five to ten years.

### **Survey Data**

A survey was sent to the four superintendents before the interviews were conducted. The survey included 26 common referendum strategies. Since the sample size for the survey was much too small for quantitative analysis, its primary purpose was to elicit a deeper understanding of the strategies and processes that these superintendents had used in previous referendum campaigns. The survey responses provided background for the individual interviews. On the surveys, the superintendents provided authentic data regarding the strategies and variables they believed to have a very strong influence on the passing of a school referendum. Superintendents rated the 26 variables using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1: No positive influence to 5: Very strong positive influence. Of the 26 strategies, the mean rating was 3.76; the range was 1-5, and the mode was 5. Table 6 shows a breakdown of the mean score for each of the 26 variables. The highest ranked strategies considered very strong influences on referendum passage included: (a) having full support of the school board is absolute (M=5), (b) chairpersons are both school and community based persons (M=5), (c) neighborhood canvassing is utilized (M=5), (d) paid services are used for statistical and advertising strategies (M=5), (e) campaign signs are placed in community yards (M=5), (f) getting out the vote strategies and reminders are sent to voting bodies (M=5), (g) targeted mailings are utilized (M=5), and (h) a short campaign is utilized (M=4.75). These eight strategies ranked the highest but were not necessarily in rank order. These variables had the overall highest mean values based upon the superintendents' surveys. Further down the list were multiple strategies, scoring between a 3 and 4 on the Likert scale, that showed some variance among the superintendents' ratings. These factors, particularly the variables regarding budget cuts if the referendum failed and preemptive budget cuts, lend further question to the individual philosophical differences among the four superintendents and also possibly to the history and relationship of each superintendent to their school board and community.

Finally, survey data were reviewed to assess any strategies that these superintendents believed did not have any positive influence on referendum passage. The use of advertising in newspapers (M=1), making T-shirts and wearing them (M=2.25), and TV advertising (M=1) were all viewed as having no positive influence by all four superintendents in the study. Two of these strategies have fallen victim to the ever-changing technological advances of advertising and communication. Newspapers and television commercials, despite delivering the same message, may not reach the same number of voters as social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and others.

**Table 10**

*Mean Scores of Strategies from Superintendent Surveys*

Variable	Mean
1. Support of the school board is absolute	5
2. Chairpersons are both school and community-based	5
3. Neighborhood canvassing is used	5
4. Paid services for statistical and advertising strategy	5
5. Campaign signs in community	5
6. Get out the vote strategies and reminders sent	5
7. Targeted mailings are utilized	5
8. Short campaign planning is utilized	4.75
9. Touted student academic achievement	4.5
10. Central Office Campaigns	4.25
11. Blanket newsletters are utilized	4.25
12. Website is utilized for information and feedback	4
13. Community campaigns are utilized	4
14. Employed campaign consultant	4
15. Phone banks were used	4
16. Message training for PAC Committee	3.75
17. Use of board elections/precinct data is utilized	3.5
18. Low-key campaign targeting yes voters is utilized	3.5
19. Extensive campaign is utilized	3.5
20. Preemptive budget cutting prior to referendum	3.5
21. Creating a list of potential cuts if referendum fails	3.25
22. Use of marquees, banners, and semi-permanent advertising	2.25
23. T-shirts are made and worn	2.25
24. Local politicians' endorsements	2.25

25. Advertising in newspapers	1
26. T.V. advertising is utilized	1

*Note.* Mean scores were based on responses of four district superintendents.

### Superintendent Interviews

**Table 11**

*Superintendent Information*

Superintendent	District name	Locale	N of Referendums
Dr. Lincoln	Black Oak	City	5
Dr. Jefferson	Rushmore	Suburb	6
Dr. Washington	Hamilton	Suburb	6
Dr. Adams	Henry	City	4

I met with each superintendent in the study to further discuss the strategies and variables they believed affected referendum passage or failure rates. Each of the superintendents shared their experiences, both positive and negative; what they believed was absolutely necessary if a school district intended to pass a referendum, as well as their reflections on what they would do differently in future referendums. One superintendent shared, “I don’t believe a single ballot question has passed in Indiana when there was not unanimous school board support. I would never attempt a referendum with a split vote of any kind.” This sentiment was shared among the other superintendents as well. This statement lends credence to the aforementioned rankings that superintendents need unanimous school board support, as a split board could lead to ambiguity and mixed messages being shared with the public. Each of the superintendents ranked this at a level five and shared in the interview process the importance of having consensus among the school board.

A second strategy that was prevalent in the interviews was the necessity to begin planning well in advance but not necessarily beginning the official referendum campaign. According to Superintendent Lincoln, “We began 24-36 months before receiving any funding. Our normal projection time is 18 months.” Superintendent Washington shared a similar sentiment, “Create and begin working with your Political Action Committee (PAC) at least six months before the school board votes to place the referendum on the ballot.” He continued,

You need to have a great deal of public input and conversations at the board table in the lead up, meaning months and months with a great deal of supporting data that will point to a very obvious need for the type of referendum to choose.

The superintendent interviews all shared a very common theme in that the referendum process is a political activity and not an educational activity. For example, Dr. Lincoln shared, “I quickly changed my personal perspective to that of an experienced political operative.”

In addition to strategies that these superintendents found to be poignant in a positive fashion, I inquired about potential social or political barriers to success. Each of them shared that during their first referendum process they had learned a great deal about the thinking in the community that they had either underestimated or were not aware were prevalent thoughts. Superintendent Jefferson shared, “We were not prepared for a well-organized opposition group. We learned first-hand that the old-adage, ‘If you’re explaining, you’re losing’ is very accurate.” In similar fashion, Dr. Lincoln explained, “Apathy is real. When you are good it becomes expected. People need to be reminded what the referendum funds are used for and how this this contributes to the program.” Regardless of the necessity of a school referendum, all four superintendents agreed there will be opposition due to the fact that, in most cases, there is an increase in local taxes in some nature; and, there are many individuals who oppose any project

that increases taxes at all. Finally, I asked the superintendents about the nature of proposing a May versus a November referendum and the strategy behind this. Superintendent Washington shared, “Avoid general election cycles as they will be too contentious. May is usually better than November.” Superintendent Jefferson further explained,

There are situational elements involved. The data shows that May has a better pass rate history however sometimes a November election has no other questions on the ballot so it may have a lower turnout. One theory is that May has a feeling to voters that they are there to vote for someone [such as in a primary] and psychologically this makes people who are voting a little more inclined to vote for things on the ballot.

Superintendent Lincoln expressed the same opinion stating, “May is easier to pass as you can make the referendum the key elective issue and your supporters will come out.”

### **Qualitative Summary**

This section investigated and summarized the survey data and superintendent interviews by analyzing the variables in the aforementioned sectors of social, community-based, and referendum factors. Due to the limitations of the survey and interview questions, many of the variables fell under the referendum-based sector as each of the variables is a common referendum campaign strategy. Qualitative data from the superintendents presented an argument that community-based factors and referendum-based factors carried more value in the referendum process than did social factors. The superintendents lead four very different and diverse school districts in Indiana. These schools utilized in the study had varied levels of poverty, numbers of students, types of referendum, and the cost to the taxpayers in each district over the last ten years had spanned the referendum spectrum. The emergence of seven to eight strategies that each superintendent found very positive for success, as well as two to three

variables having little to no positive influence, was fairly homogeneous. Individual philosophies of each superintendent, their relationship with the school board and community, and other unique characteristics of the school district and community norms may have influenced the variables that showed dispersion among the responses. For example, one superintendent believed a long, drawn out and well-articulated referendum campaign was the most prudent method while others felt a shorter, more concise process was more effective. Additionally, the use of targeted mailings to potential yes voters versus blanketed mailings to the entire community also displayed a potential difference in approach. Interestingly a fourth political sector emerged from the surveys and interviews. One superintendent stated that he had become a political operative during the process, and several of the variables have multiple underpinnings of the politics that exist in communities and among superintendents and school boards. Variables including having full school board support, examining voter patterns in the community, seeking local politician's endorsements of the referendum, and getting out the vote strategies are all concepts that would be characterized as political decisions more so than referendum, community, or social variables.

### **Summary**

Several key findings were reported in this chapter. Based on regression models of significant variables, the variable of percentage of college graduates in the community was the only statistically significant variable. This variable was significant in the abundance of regression models that analyzed different variables in the community, school, and referendum sectors. A second finding was that neither the type nor the date of the referendum in isolation had statistical significance. Data collected over a 10-year span showed that operating referendums and referendums held in May have a higher percentage of passing rates. When analyzed among other referendum-based variables, these variables showed significance in only 2 models. The tax

rate and maximum total amount, the two variables most associated with school referendums, also did not show statistical significance when analyzed in isolation against the dependent variable. However, it is noteworthy that both of these variables was statistically significant in several of the referendum models lending one to believe they factor into voters' decisions to vote for or against a proposed referendum. An additional finding regarded school sector variables. The total enrollment of the school, the academic-based nature of school rank, and the passing rate of both math and language scores were found to be statistically significant in multiple school models. Interestingly the rank of the school and higher academic success did not show significance in the same relationship. School rank displayed a positive relationship with passing rates while academic success on math and language was negative. Perceptions that schools that achieve higher on standardized assessments are more successful at passing referendums was not necessarily validated through the analysis. Additionally, total enrollment of the school only showed significance when in analysis with other statistically significant variables within the school sector.

The qualitative portion of this chapter focused on strategies and variables that may affect referendum passage or failure rates and how important they are in the referendum campaign. After they had rated 26 common referendum strategies based on their perceptions of impact and prevalence on previous referendums, four Indiana school superintendents were interviewed. The 26 strategies were ranked based on a Likert Scale of 1-5; the mean score was 3.76, with eight of the strategies being identified by all four superintendents as having a strongly positive influence on referendum passage. These variables included (a) having full support of the school board as an absolute, (b) chairpersons are both school and community-based, (c) neighborhood canvassing is used, (d) paid services for statistical and advertising strategy are utilized, (e)

campaign signs are displayed in the community, (f) getting out the vote strategies and reminders are used, (g) targeted mailings are utilized, and (h) a short campaign plan is utilized. Interviews with the four superintendents provided further knowledge, information, and strategies to be considered by school districts attempting to pass a school referendum in the near future. Finally, in addition to the community, school, and referendum sectors, a fourth political sector was identified as one that superintendents and those associated with school referendums should consider as they plan for and progress through the referendum campaign. Chapter 5 explores these findings in more depth and provides additional information and summary data for the study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the qualitative and quantitative results of the study are summarized. Information for future researchers and school officials regarding implications of school referendums in addition to potential strategies that school districts could incorporate for success are provided. School districts in Indiana have three options for the type of referendum they can propose to local voters. The three types of school referendums are general (school tax levy or operating), construction (controlled project), and debt refinance. The referenda have very different purposes, guidelines, and implications if they are successful or defeated. Ultimately, local community members and taxpayers will be financially affected by a successful referendum as the local school tax rate will increase based upon the cost of the approved referendum. The ideological and philosophical beliefs of voters greatly impact the types of referenda that will be funded. For example, Larry DeBoer (2018) found that voters in some districts are supportive of increases in the salaries of their local school district's teaching staff and are willing in some cases to vote in favor of general referendums when the money goes directly to school salaries and other operating processes of the district. They are voting to allow the school to raise revenue for the district's purpose of educating the students of the community. Conversely, school construction referendums have not always been as popular with the voters; in some cases, they are viewed as extravagances or simply unnecessary upgrades of current buildings and grounds. Voters in all types of locales have been less prone to vote in favor of construction referendums as they believe school districts should operate inside their means and within the previous and existing facilities (DeBoer, 2018).

The referendum process became more prevalent in the years 2008-2009 when legislation changed the way school districts were funded. School districts quickly learned the referendum process was the mechanism by which they could fund new construction to keep up with student growth and mitigate loss of revenue. It was unfortunate for school districts that general voters were not informed about the reasoning and logic behind referendums and sometimes only observed them as a tax increase. As more schools began to propose referendums and, more importantly, as school districts learned from prior mistakes, referendums became more common and also more successful. School districts proposed numerous general and construction referendums over the years and experienced greater success and passing rates in the most recent years.

Over the last ten years in Indiana, eight to twelve school referendums have been on the ballot in either the fall or spring election cycle depending on the timing of the elections. Although there is and will always be mixed reviews and opinions about the use of referendums by school districts, they remain the most common and efficient mechanism for a school district to raise dollars for general or operational use. School districts propose either projects or revenue increases to be paid over the course of seven years or until a new referendum is ratified. Well in advance of the voting process, how these generated funds will be used as well as a very detailed purpose for the referendum must be outlined.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand what variables and factors are related to the passing or failing rates of referendums in Indiana schools. This study investigated multiple variables and calculations that had been collected by CEEP in a database of Indiana School Referenda over the last eight years. Additionally, this study sought to understand the methods

school districts enact to ascertain the primary and secondary factors associated with the passage or failure of a school referendum. The study investigated the positive and negative variables associated with school districts that succeeded in passing school referendums versus those that failed.

A secondary purpose of this descriptive study was to understand the effectiveness of factors and strategies surrounding the passage of school referenda in the State of Indiana. Each state in the United States has unique laws that outline the procedural measures school districts must enact to begin the referendum process. Additionally, strategies and variables were divided into three sectors (Community/Social, School, and Referendum Variables) in order to discover relationships between voters and referendum passage or failure in each of these unique sectors. The quantitative component of the study focused on multiple variables from each sector including the cost and tax rate of projects, the type of project, the timing of the project, the community demographics, the school demographics, and other community-based factors. The qualitative component focused on the most commonly used referendum strategies and analyzed their significance and relevance through survey and interview data from four experienced Indiana superintendents.

## **Major Findings**

### **Research Question One**

1. Based upon data from the 2019 CEEP database, what factors and variables have the strongest statistical relationship to referendum passage or failure rates?

Quantitative analysis using nineteen variables determined which, if any, were significantly related to referendum passage rates in Indiana. Variables were categorized into sectors including school-based, community/social, and referendum. Seven variables showed a

positive correlation with referendum passage including (a) the size of population of the community, (b) the median age, (c) the percentage of college graduates in the community, (d) the median housing value, (e) the tax rate of the referendum, (f) the total enrollment of the school district, and (g) the percentage of English language learners in the district. Regression models then ascertained which of the positively correlated variables had the strongest statistical relationship to referendum passage. Of the seven variables, the percentage of college graduates in a community was the only variable found to have a statistically significant relationship to referendum pass rates. In many of the regression models, multiple variables showed a statistical significance when viewed in isolation to other variables of the same sector or to a smaller number of variables from another sector. For example, the referendum variables of tax rate and maximum total amount of the project were statistically significant when regressed in isolation to only the referendum variables or when isolated with specific variables from other sectors. Data from the models suggested that these variables were significant statistically and also practically with voters.

It was equally intriguing that multiple variables were not stronger contributors to the passage or failure of referendums as based upon statistical analysis. These included (a) the locale of the district, (b) the type of referendum, (c) the timing of the referendum, (d) the median voting age, and (e) the percentage of voters over the age of 65. The most interesting variable not statistically relevant was the timing of the referendum. From the inception of referendums in Indiana, raw data have shown a far higher passing rate for referendums occurring in May as opposed to those in November. The timing of the referendum was expected to be highly significant, but correlation and regression analysis did not find the timing of the referendum predictive of passage rates.

**Research Question Two**

2. In school districts that passed or failed referendums in Indiana, what primary strategies did superintendents perceive as the most influential and critical for success or failure? What internal political, social, and demographic factors did superintendents in Indiana determine as significant for successful referendums?

The qualitative analysis provided pragmatic and practical approaches to the referendum process as the interviews were conducted with superintendents who had been through multiple referendum campaigns. Most participants had experienced both passages and failures under their tenure at their school districts. Survey information as well as interviews was used to gather a more in-depth understanding of which strategies and variables the four seasoned superintendents felt had the most positive influence with voters in referendum campaigns. Chapter 4 outlined the multiple strategies that the superintendents in the study believed had the strongest influence on a referendum passing. These included (a) having full support of the school board before entering into a referendum campaign, (b) utilizing chairpersons from both the school district and the community, (c) canvassing the neighborhood to share the message and get out the vote, (d) paying for statistical and advertising strategies to accurately and creatively share the campaign message, (e) placing campaign signs in community yards, (f) getting out the vote strategies and reminders using social media, utilizing targeted mailings, and finally (g) initiating a shorter campaign. These seven strategies ranked the highest but were not necessarily in rank order. These variables had the overall highest mean values on the superintendents' surveys, and it was evident through the interviews that all of the superintendents felt these strategies would provide the school district with the best possible chance of passing the referendum.

**Connection to Literature**

Research conducted over 35 years ago by Philip Piele and John Hall still provides the foundation for contemporary scholarly work on referendums (Lifto & Senden, 2010). According to Lifto and Senden, there are eleven key factors that are most associated in both practice and research with successful school tax elections. These factors were derived from the earlier work of Philip Piele and John Hall's *Budgets, Bonds, and Ballots* (1973) as well numerous authors who carried the work into the present. Additionally, the factors and strategies identified by Johnson and Ingle (2008) and Holt et al. (2006) served as a foundation for school district success with tax referendums. The primary factors and strategies common to the Johnson, Ingle, and Holt studies were a focus on yes voters, communication with the community, and other variables unique to the district. Subsequently, these areas have been researched to help discover how they are related to passage or failure rates. Additionally, these variables are associated with the external and internal factors that impact the overall referendum process (Cash & Twiford, 2010).

Further research was provided by Lifto and Senden (2010) in their book *School Finance Elections: A comprehensive Planning Model for Success*. Eleven strategies were highlighted as the key variables associated with positive passage rates: (a) unanimous election resolution and support by the school board throughout the campaign, (b) high levels of trust, satisfaction, and perceptions of quality for its schools, (c) comprehensive campaign planning, and effective execution based on current research, best practices, and demographic characteristics of the community, (d) outstanding public relations throughout the year tailored to the unique audiences in the district and focused on the purpose of a successful election, (e) polling data to understand community's perceptions, (f) strong alignment between the purpose and cost of the project with the community's willingness to pay higher taxes, (g) broad-based and strategic community involvement in planning, (h) effective use of voter files and databases to target and canvass yes

voters, (i) success in obtaining key community members and their endorsements, (j) the absence of an organized opposition group, and (k) including funding for technology and information about site-specific improvements. Reflection upon the interviews with the four superintendents allowed me to observe several consistencies with the literature on school referendum campaigns and the experiences and observations of the superintendents in their respective districts. Most notable were having (a) unanimous board support, (b) outstanding public relations, (c) community involvement as part of the campaign committee, (d) paid services for statistical and advertising strategies, and (e) getting out the yes voters by using effective strategies and utilizing the voter database file. These strategies all scored a 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 by the superintendents and had also been noted in the works of previous researchers including Lifo and Senden, and Johnson and DeBoer. Additional variables and strategies found to be highly valuable both in research and in practice included highlighting the strengths and accolades of the school district and canvassing neighborhoods with these messages.

Some of these identified strategies had large effects on referendum results while others were marginally related, or in some cases, statistically irrelevant. According to Lifo and Senden (2010), schools hoping to pass a referendum have a much better chance if the public perception and support for the district is high. In one study of Minnesota school tax elections between 1996 and 2000, when more than 17% of the public gave their public schools fair or poor marks, 27 of 30 elections failed. When less than 17% rated their schools fair or poor, 76 out of 77 elections passed. Public perception is everything when it comes to passing a school referendum.

Continuous and targeted communication is paramount and must be conducted at all times and not just prior to a referendum campaign. Three identified areas included outstanding quality, ongoing public relations, and focused messages to different audiences emphasizing the proposal's

purpose and benefits. This included giving the same speech to multiple groups but tailoring the specifics to that group's identity. Districts do not want to educate voters while asking them to support a referendum as it is too late. School referendums are a masterful combination of taking the "what" or content of the referendum and relating it to the "how much" or cost of the referendum and the imminent tax impact.

Finally, the lack of an opposition group was identified as one of the single greatest factors in passing a school referendum and one of the most difficult pieces to overcome. School leaders are urged to minimize their influence by attempting to control or reduce other controversies as well as to work with these groups to negotiate areas of agreement or compromise. Two areas where superintendent views varied involved campaign length and style. Several of the superintendents in the study believed a faster, shorter, and low-key referendum campaign was the best approach. Much of the evidence suggests that garnering community support is more critical to success when many of the households in the district do not have school-aged children.

The qualitative component of my analysis provided interesting commonalities with the research performed on school referendum campaigns. Many similarities existed in the research in relation to the strategies that current superintendents used in referendum campaigns in Indiana over the last few years. The strategies noted by researchers who had replicated previous studies on school bond issues or elections or who had expanded on the works of those before them as well as those that had been ranked the highest and noted by all four superintendents in this study included: canvassing yes voters and specific neighborhoods, using polling data, gaining unanimous school board support, utilizing both school and community leaders for campaign efforts, and paying advertising and statistical experts.

Suburban school districts traditionally are some of the wealthiest districts in the state of Indiana. Additional tax levies would not impact these families like they might in other locales. City locales, however, are traditionally some of the higher-funded districts in the state of Indiana as they have the highest levels of free and reduced students and low housing values. Due to the nature of how taxes are distributed among residential and commercial business, city locales are not as dependent on homeowners to fund referendums by increases in taxes as are town, rural, and suburban locales. The amount of taxable property in cities and suburbs allow the distribution and overall impact of referendum increases to be spread out among all home and business owners at the tax cap levels (DeBoer, 2018).

Historically, school districts in Indiana have not considered the timing of the referendum as a significant variable. Most districts based their referendum campaign and election on the need and purpose. However, as more referendums made their way to the voters, schools began to see trends in percentages passing versus failing according to the timing of the referendums. Factors including whether or not it was a presidential election year, gubernatorial or senate election, or a local election for school board members became important as school districts observed that success was more likely when the school referendum had a greater influence at the poll (DeBoer, 2018). When the school referendum election was one of the primary voting opportunities, with no other larger or more advertised campaigns, school districts discovered that their referendums passed more frequently. By the nature of how elections are held in Indiana and the United States, this made the May election cycle more enticing to school districts since the school referendum was often the focal point of the average voter. May elections also historically see fewer voters and schools focus their campaigns on getting out the yes vote to pass referendums. In a sense, school superintendents have shared that it is as much about politics as it

is about the actual referendum. Additionally, prior experience with the referendum campaign process may count. According to DeBoer (2018, p. 1),

Through May 2018, school districts proposing their first referendums passed 51 percent of them. Tax hikes that had been on the ballot before reached 84 percent approval.

Experience counts. It seems that school officials learn how to run a campaign — or how not to run one — and do better the second time around.

Notably, in 2019 the state government proposed legislation to limit school referendums to only November elections, perhaps in response to the recent success of May referendums. Public scrutiny from local opposition groups and certain political factions are currently fighting to limit school districts' ability to hold elections during the May election when they have proven more successful. School leaders across Indiana view this as a mechanism to suppress a school's ability to hold a referendum as, statistically speaking, they will have a lower chance of passing than if the referendum was put forth amid general and primary elections.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study serve as a roadmap for current and future school superintendents who are seeking a school referendum in their district. Unfortunately, as Senden and Lifo pointed out in *School Finance Elections*, “a cookie cutter approach will not work” and “school districts are more successful when research and campaign strategies are adapted to the community’s values and demographic characteristics (Lifo & Senden, 2010, p. 4). Although all school districts fall into either the city, suburb, town, or rural locale, each is a smaller microcosm of a larger community. Community values and beliefs on property taxes, what types of buildings should be restored or built, how much value is placed on education and teachers, as well as overall demographics on the age of voters, type of voters, and SES of the community all can

influence and, in some cases, alter the referendum campaign. Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study as well as research and practice, superintendents seeking a school referendum can implement the following steps to advance their chances of passing a referendum:

1. Campaigns for referendums must start in the very early stages, even if only a few persons are on the committee. In most cases, 12-18 months will be needed for the entire campaign, with the last 3-6 months the most involved politically. Superintendents in this study used varying models but all agreed that preliminary discussions with school board officials and the public must be held well in advance and should be based on future projections.
2. Key community members, politicians, and decisions-makers should be approached and informed very early in the campaign. Key leadership in the community may come in various forms including presidents of local youth teams, leaders of churches and business, and longtime residents who have gained respect from the community. They need to hold key positions and be visible the entire time. Lifo and Senden (2010) identified success in obtaining key VIP and organizational endorsements as one of the 10 factors needed to pass a referendum. The superintendents of this study identified influential pastors, real estate agents, and business owners who were widely known and respected in the community.
3. Two of the superintendents in the study met significant opposition to their referendums. Strategies they shared were to meet early with potential opposition groups and/or previous naysayers of school referendum projects to see if there were areas where compromise or further discussion might still allow for the project to proceed. Superintendents should try to avoid having an organized opposition group at all costs. In *School Finance Elections*, two strategies

included attempting to reduce other controversies and negotiating positions between influential persons (Lifto & Senden, 2010).

4. Most school systems are not equipped to do a fully-fledged referendum campaign on their own. Public relations is a very hireable service and can be very beneficial in getting the message to voters. School districts should hire a marketing company for statistics and advertising. This group may also be able to help with the political aspect of the campaign including how to target likely yes voters and which demographic groups will be most likely to support your campaign.

5. Referenda are more successful in the May election cycle versus the November election cycle. Through 2015, school districts passed 44% of referendums conducted in November, while 67% passed in May. In 2018, May went to 100% passing, with November passing at 67% (DeBoer, 2018). The law on this may be changing but for now school districts have more success with May referendums. Since its inception, Indiana has shown a higher percentage of passing referendums in May as opposed to November (CEEP, 2019).

6. Districts should focus on the tax rate of the project rather than the total cost. The total cost illuminates the shock value; but ultimately, most advertising will focus on the amount of increase to the average voter's tax rate. In this study, the tax rate was a statistically significant variable in the percent of referendums passing while the total cost was not. As one superintendent shared, "If you are explaining, you are losing." The tax rate commonly used as a threshold is 30 cents per assessed dollar. Referenda are more likely to pass with tax increases below this threshold level. Also, projects over 70 cents per assessed dollar have very little success of passing (DeBoer, 2018).

7. Review the number of colleges graduates in the district as a baseline. This statistic held the highest correlation with passing rate of all variables. It was the only variable that held

significance when compared to other variables that had a significant correlation to passing. A district should consider this and potentially look for ways to do smaller, more frequent projects that will not require a tax rate. Alternately, they should be aware that the campaign may need to be targeted to different demographic groups than college graduates.

8. Superintendents should ensure the new projects and upgrades to be financed through the referendum are ones that the community will support. This is not easy but using samples and polls can help gauge voter opinion. Factor 6 in *School Finance Elections* (Lifto & Senden, 2010) discussed creating a proposal that reflects strong alignment between its purpose and cost and the community's priorities. The "what" as compared to the "how much" must be aligned. Dr. Jefferson, one of the Superintendents from the study, explained how the district struggled to build a new pool and stadium but had no problem building a new fine arts area and preschool due to community interests. Superintendents need to evaluate what is valued in the community.

9. Learn from previous referendum passages or failures as, in many cases, they were very close or there was one single variable that allowed for passage or failure. Three of the four superintendents in this study had been part of a failing and passing referendum and thus were able to learn from their previous missteps in the campaign. In Indiana in 2018, five of the referendums were proposed by school districts that had proposed tax increases before. Four of these passed. Seven referenda were proposed by districts seeking to pass a referendum for the first time. Four of these passed. Districts who had previously gone through the process passed at 80%, while first time districts passed at 57%. Those percentages are pretty close to the 10-year average (DeBoer , 2018).

10. Canvassing the neighborhoods and community, going door to door with school officials, and other public advertising are highly valuable strategies to gain votes for passage. Each successful

campaign in the study used this approach. Some did a one-day blast of the community while others did a spread-out approach. This strategy is commonly found in the literature as a viable strategy.

11. Depending on the locale of the district, superintendents may need to consider what type of referendum will succeed. General fund referendums and construction referendums have varying levels of passage rates among locales in Indiana. CEEP data in the study showed interesting data that at times contrasted with wealth patterns and perceptions. For example, construction referendums passed at an amazing 83.3% rate in cities but only at 47.8% in suburbs and 39.1% in rural locales. Conversely, general referendums did best in suburbs with a 78% pass rate but struggled in cities and towns at 62% and 41% pass rates, respectively.

### **Implications for Policy**

School referendum policy in Indiana is still relatively new. My study focused on the last 11-12 years of the current referendum model and its associated thresholds and policies. During my analysis, policy changed several times regarding the types and cost of projects that were deemed as referendum projects due to the overall cost. Originally in Indiana, elementary buildings proposed at \$10 million or higher, secondary buildings proposed at \$20 million or higher, and other buildings projects proposed at \$12 million or higher had to go through the referendum process. In later years, adjustments were made by state legislators to change these thresholds, in many cases, raising them. Now, referendums are based on assessed valuation of the school district and are given a timeline for general referendums, which lasts up to seven years.

One major implication for referendum policy is currently under consideration in the Indiana State Legislature. The aim of the original bill was to begin to diminish school districts'

ability to pass school referendums of all types. The legislation proposes that schools can only attempt a referendum in November. This is dangerous for school districts for two reasons. The first is that this would only allow schools to propose referendums once a year; thus, in some cases, they had to wait a full school year. The second reason, referenced earlier in my study, was that November referendums have a history of passing at lower rates as they are commonly overshadowed by presidential or gubernatorial elections or other high-profile elections. This would potentially force school districts to hold special elections, thus encumbering the associated costs of \$50,000 to \$60,000, and in most cases, a very small voting base.

Indiana school districts need to advocate against this measure and any other measures that diminish the ability of schools to put forth a referendum to the voters of the community. The referendum process is an extremely transparent process where voters have several months in which to ask questions, share their opinions, and ultimately vote against the referendum, if needed. Additionally, school districts must go through several procedural processes with other municipalities and local governments before proposing a referendum. The biggest such agency is the DLGF (Department of Local Governance Finance). These checks and balances make this process a daunting one. Thus, many districts do not use the referendum process unless needed for new projects or, in many cases, they have a shortfall of state general funding.

### **Implications for Theory**

This study was framed by diffusion theory and the innovative decision process. Diffusion theory has continued to gain traction and attention in the public service and public policy areas with considerable emphasis on the diffusion of innovations in the health care and educational fields (Nutley & Davies, 2000). Rogers (2003) defined diffusion as “the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social

system” (p. 5). There are four premises to the theory: (a) the innovation itself, (b) the communication channels to spread information about the innovation, (c) time, and (d) the nature of the society where it is introduced. Although growing in popularity and frequency, school referendums in Indiana would still be considered an innovation needed to offset lack of funding for employees or to provide additional funding for building projects in school districts.

School operating levies have been around for decades in other states; however, the process discussed in previous chapters began in Indiana in 2008-2009, and Indiana has averaged double-digit referendums during this time. One obstacle of innovation is uncertainty. Rogers (2003) described uncertainty as the consequences of innovation and as “the changes that occur in an individual or a social system as a result of the innovation or rejection of the innovation (p. 436). The referendum process aligns with this definition of uncertainty as it typically creates division, questions, and at times, skepticism among voters of all kinds. Voters choose to accept the innovative plan or reject it through campaigning and voting. In the referendum process, communication is paramount for both the supporters and rejectors of innovations.

Rogers (2003) described the innovation-decision process as “an information-seeking and information-processing activity, where an individual is motivated to reduce uncertainty about the advantages and disadvantages of an innovation” (p. 172). He continued, “individuals should be informed about its advantages and disadvantages to make them aware of all its consequences” (p. 172). School districts have a duty by law and by code to keep the public informed of any type of referendum project well in advance of the referendum. School board meetings, public meetings, and public notices are part of this legal process. However, most important is the necessity of communicating the message fairly, openly, and without bias. This communication occurs in multiple ways including mass media and interpersonal communications. Further, it must be

frequent, honest, and allow for all persons to ask questions and get answers. Interpersonal channels, such as blogs, websites, Twitter pages, and Instagram, can be very powerful as they can strengthen attitudes held by an individual or group. Time and the social system are the last two components of the diffusion model, with time simply being the length of the innovation, and the social system comprising all of the interrelated groups of persons, organizations, and voters working either together or as adversaries toward a common goal. In this analysis, the ultimate innovation is the passing or defeating of the referendum.

The decision-innovation process of the diffusion model has five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation (Nutley et al., 2002). Each of these stages is represented in the referendum process. When school districts want to put forth a referendum, legal and ethical considerations about communication are absolute. Schools must meet procedural guidelines to be eligible to move forward with general or construction referendums. This includes notifying the patrons of the community, school personnel, businesses, and all other taxed agents of the district. In this stage, many plans and ideas are shared. In most cases, general referendums are much simpler in regards to what is communicated to voters. These referendums ask the community to raise the current local tax to generate more dollars for general use. This usually means more staff, better paid staff, or smaller projects. In contrast, construction referendums are much more complex, expensive, and have very detailed plans that must be shared. This process leads to the persuasion stage. The school campaign attempts to persuade the voters to be in favor of the project/referendum and fights to stop opposition groups or persons who desire to vote down these projects. These campaigns become a political battle and are analogous to a political campaign with the goal of getting a majority to vote in your favor. Ultimately, the decision is made the day of the election. One side must

achieve at least 50.01% of votes to either pass or defeat the referendum. Stage four, implementation, is demonstrated by beginning the work of the project or by increasing the levy. If the referendum was defeated, a school may go back to the beginning stages. Assuming that the referendum was successful, the final stage, confirmation, is similar to acceptance and finalization.

Applying these theories to this study, consistencies in process and practice are seen in both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study. One overarching theme in successful referendum projects is the absolute necessity and importance of frequent communication and transparency of the process. The diffusion model educates the voters about a new innovation or series of innovation that may impact the amount of taxes they pay. The information seeking period aligns well with the initial steps of the referendum campaign process. For example, the school superintendents in the study all shared the importance and benefits of communicating well in advance of any public meetings. Providing patrons and voters of the district full details allows them to begin to decipher between the advantages and disadvantages to make an informed decision. Additionally, the use of media outlets, including social media platforms, to inform the public of upcoming innovations was a common approach used by school districts. These communication cycles throughout the process ultimately prepared voters to make well-informed decisions based on the outcomes (innovation) and their own beliefs of the project.

The work performed by the school districts in the study to achieve passing referendums was validated by the decision-innovation process. The five stages of this theory are organized in such a way that congruency to the school referendum process of the four district schools is very clear. Each district had to inform and educate the electorate on the needs of the school district, the lack of financial support, and the benefits of the project. Superintendent Washington

explained the first step, called knowledge, as “the most critical step in the process as it speaks to the credibility of the district.” The second stage is gaining support through persuasion. This was exemplified by the multiple strategies these four districts used to gain voter support. Canvassing signs, phone calls, meetings with groups, and many other examples were identified. The final three stages speak to the election and, if successful, implementation of the project, followed by acceptance of the defeat or win. When the superintendents from the study were successful, they followed the exact plan for the projects, even looking for possible ways to lower costs. One superintendent shared that gloating is never a wise strategy as it will only weaken the chances of passing a future referendum. These theories undergirded the referendum process for the study participants as well as other models in the state of Indiana.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study, like most, had limitations that must be conceded. The data set was limited to only Indiana school districts since the inception of the referendum process. The sample size for the quantitative analyses was limited to approximately one-third of current Indiana school districts that had put forth one or multiple school referendums since 2008. Additionally, the demographic data, which included many of the continuous variables used in the quantitative analysis, were taken from the most recent United States Census in 2010. Due to the timing of the study and 2020 Census, these data were nearly ten years old. Although many of the same trends were proportional to what 2020 would project, some discrepancies must be expected. Future researchers would benefit from using the most recent school and community datasets since many areas, especially suburban districts, have grown immensely in size, and the makeup of the community is often very different. One of the main purposes of this analysis was to distinguish which, if any, variables or strategies had a positive influence on the passage or failure of the

referendum. Regression analysis found that the percentage of college graduates in the community was the only statistically significant variable. This relationship implied that more affluent communities were more likely to pass a referendum. Additional research in this area would be beneficial to school districts seeking a referendum as other data points, including the tax rate, the size of the district, and the percent of English Language Learners, had shown significance in correlation models. Further information on the influence of SES, community make-up, and the cost to the taxpayer would shed light on future referendums.

Qualitative analysis was utilized to assess the quantitative data variables that had shown significance as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the referendum process from the perspectives of superintendents who had been highly involved in the process. I sought four Indiana superintendents to be interviewed and to fill out survey questions on strategies they had used in successful referendums. This data was invaluable however, future research should include all superintendents in Indiana who have worked on a referendum campaign as well as the use of a broader survey. The referendum process, for some, would be new; and some insights may be learned by experienced superintendents after a failing campaign. It would be prudent to meet with superintendents or possibly campaign managers of district referendums as they may be best qualified to answer specifics regarding strategy. Further, reaching out to a larger number of superintendents in Indiana or beyond would be more difficult without the use of technology. It would be wise to use a sampling tracking program, including multiple online survey programs, to improve efficiency.

Future research on referendums in other midwestern states would be a final area of consideration. Many states, including Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and Missouri, have very different processes for school referendums. In these states, they are called school bond elections; and in

most cases, they are similar in that increases to the school levy must be voted on by the electorate. However, each state has a longer history of school referendums, and in some cases, the percentage of voters approving a referendum changed based on the timing of the election and the support needed for passage. In a study of Missouri school districts, several trends emerged. The first was that between 2009-2016, 76.3% of all school bond issues put forth by Missouri school districts were proposed to the public during April rather than February, August, or November. In Indiana, referendums can only be proposed in May or November, unless the school district pays for a special election. In all, 96% of school bond issues proposed by Missouri school districts between 2009-2016 were floated to the public during elections requiring a four-sevenths majority (57.14%) vote for approval, rather than elections requiring a two-thirds majority (66.67%). In Indiana, it is a simple majority (50.01%). Lastly, school bond issues enjoyed high levels of success, as 86% of bond issues were approved by voters between 2009-2016. Bonds floated during elections that required a four-sevenths majority were roughly 3.2 times more likely to be approved than bond issues requiring a two-thirds majority (Dutton, 2018). Similar to Missouri, Indiana has seen varying success rates based on the timing of the referendum. May referendums have passed at 73% compared to a 53% pass rate in November. School district superintendents should acknowledge this metric as new legislation may require all school referendums to take place in November beginning in 2021.

### **Summary**

Chapter five presented an overview of the study which included the variables and strategies found to have statistically significant relationships to referendum passage, a qualitative review, as well as an integration of previous and current literature on the topic of school referendums in Indiana. Review of research was provided for current and future superintendents

and school administrators to use as a platform for their school districts if they determined that a school referendum of any kind would be necessary. I provided both statistical and practical information from experienced superintendents who had good understanding of the referendum process and referendum campaign strategies. The referendum process should never be initiated unless it is absolutely needed and the concerns of the school district cannot be met by other means. Unfortunately, the referendum process is a highly political and divisive process in which superintendents and voters alike can harbor their differences of opinion well beyond the final vote. Superintendents and school boards should take every effort to maximize the use of current funding and make any necessary concessions before putting the electorate in a position to vote for or against a referendum. Like many areas of life, it comes down to a matter of trust and accountability. Taxpayers expect schools to work within their means and to provide the best possible education for their students and children. Most taxpayers are very supportive of educators and schools in general. When a referendum is going to be proposed, a wise school district will have built up trust over the years by making sound fiscal and educational decisions while being completely transparent. In reality, it can be viewed as a referendum on the superintendent; and his popularity, trust factor, and ability to communicate with all patrons is extremely important. Admittedly, many voters do not fully understand the laws governing school finances or the associated regulations involving tax bases. Educating the electorate very early in the process is just one of several key steps a superintendent should take to allow for questions and explanations to be shared and to intercept any potential for opposition.

Lastly, my intent was to inform Indiana superintendents that the referendum process may face an uphill battle in the years to come. Some legislators, as well as business owners and taxpayers, view the referendum process as a way to circumvent the current tax code and policies

of Indiana. The argument is that public education is the largest single item in the annual state budget and that schools do not need additional revenues. The tax cap legislation of 2010-2011 allowed taxpayers to have a much better understanding of the taxes they could expect each year. Referendums have the ability to alter these caps by going beyond them. Many would argue that some schools have overused this process, while others should consider it. Regardless of opinion, it will become more difficult to pass a referendum if they can be placed on the ballot only in November. The last ten years have shown that there is a 20-25% difference in passing rates due to the circumstances that usually surround the November elections. School officials need to continue to fight this proposed legislation to ensure that referendums can be put forth when their school districts dictate it necessary.

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Referendum Survey and Questionnaire: Appendix A

For the survey, please rate each factor/variable for referendum passage from a scale of 1-5.

1 = No positive influence, 2= very little positive influence, 3= some positive influence, 4= strong positive influence, and 5=very strong positive influence

<b>Factors/variables for referendum passage</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Central Office Campaigns					
2. Support of the school board is absolute.					
3. Community Campaigns were utilized					
4. Message training for PAC committee members and school officials					
5. Chairpersons are both school and community-based persons					
6. School District uses marquees, banners, and other semi-permanent advertising					
7. Preemptive budget cutting prior to referendum					
8. Website is utilized for information and feedback					
9. Creating a long list of potential cuts if referendum is not to pass					
10. Neighborhood canvassing					
11. T-shirts are made and worn					
12. Paid services for statistical and advertising/strategy					
13. Advertising in newspapers					

14. Local politician’s endorsements					
15. Employed campaign consultant					
16. Campaign signs in community					
17. Get out the vote strategies and reminders are sent to voting bodies					
18. Use of board of elections/precinct data is utilized.					
19. Targeted mailings are utilized					
20. Blanket newsletters are utilized					
21. Low-key campaign targeting yes voters is utilized					
22. Short campaign planning is utilized					
23. Extensive campaign is utilized					
24. Touted student academic achievement					
25. TV advertising					
26. Phone banks were used					

### Introduction to Interview: Appendix B

I will begin the interview by asking each superintendent to tell me the stories behind a passing and failing referendum his district encountered to listen for strategies, variables or unique circumstances surrounding the referendum process. I will listen for new ideas or thoughts that were not previously in survey questions and nuances that only his district encountered in the process. I will listen and document any differences or similarities they shared about passing referendums and obstacles or barriers in the process. This will also allow me to tailor the interview to each superintendent while also probing answers and gaining further information about new topics.

### Interview Questions

1. Knowing your school community, what was your general mindsight before making the decision to move forward with a referendum? How did you expect your community to react?
2. What was the most one area that you learned in the process that you would have not expected going into the referendum process? What could you have done differently?
3. Based on your survey data you listed the following as strategies as the most effective or positive for referendum passage. Can you explain why you believe these were the most effective?

4. Based on your survey data you listed the following strategies as the least effective or positive strategies. Can you explain why you believe these were not as effective or useful in the process?
5. What strategies or variables if any did your district encounter in the referendum campaigning that served as obstacles or barriers to passage of your referendum?
6. What differences, if any, would your district go about depending on if you were placing a general fund referendum vs. a construction referendum? What may look different in the referendum campaigns?
7. What do you believe are the benefit of doing a May vs. November referendum or vice versa
8. What advice or strategies would you recommend to a school district if they were seeking a referendum in the upcoming school year to give the district the best opportunity to pass?
9. Are referendums all simply about tax increases? Do average voters care about why schools place forth referendums or will most support if they know taxes will not go up?