

**A MARKET ANALYSIS CONDUCTED FOR
KENTON CITY SCHOOLS: THE COMMUNITY'S PERCEPTIONS
OF THE SCHOOLS AND THE NEEDS OF THE SCHOOLS**

By

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METHODS USED IN THIS STUDY:

On Wednesday, August 2 and Thursday, August 3, 2006, the authors of this report conducted a series of six focus groups. Each day had a group at 10:30 A.M., 1:30 P.M., and 6:30 P.M. The group size ranged from eight to 15, with a total of 63 participants. Selection of those participating was done by school personnel with guidelines we provided. For example: those who had children in Kenton City Schools and those who did not; different age and ethnic groups; school critics; people connected to the community - - barbers, hairdressers, doctors, dentists, lawyers, realtors, etc.

The focus groups were held in the Kenton High School Media Center, with each group meeting lasting about 90 minutes. The discussions centered on five areas: the strengths and the weaknesses of Kenton City Schools; issues that would encourage someone to vote “Yes” and those that would encourage someone to vote “No” on an operating levy; and a projection of the likely voting outcome on four variations of an operating levy. Each of these areas will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this report.

Participants were asked to share not only their own perceptions, but also those of people with whom they had contact. As this report is read, it should be kept in mind that these are **perceptions - - - some may be accurate and others may not be accurate - - - but people vote with their perceptions.**

We would like to acknowledge the outstanding efforts and cooperation of everyone connected with this research project. This includes the school officials who organized the focus group sessions, those who invited and scheduled the participants in the sessions, and particularly the 63 participants who gave of their time and who shared their feelings quite openly with us and with other participants.

STRENGTHS OF KENTON CITY SCHOOLS

Following are the areas of strength identified by focus group participants. Please note that these strengths are **NOT** listed in any order of importance.

- Good teachers are found at all levels, but highest praise went to the elementary level followed by the middle school and then the high school. Comments were made about use of progressive teaching techniques; willingness to go the “extra mile”; for students; taking a personal interest in students; giving students individual attention; having many “home grown” teachers who know the community; being willing to accommodate students with disabilities and follow their I.E.P.s (especially at the elementary and middle schools).
- School finances are well managed by the Treasurer and Board of Education.
- Top administrators are local people who have been in the schools for a long time. “They know the students and their parents and care about them.”
- There are plenty of opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities: athletics; music programs; band; choir; ROTC and swimming were highlighted. Praise was given for accommodations made for students to be in athletics and also to be in the band and/choir.
- There is strong school spirit. “The atmosphere is electric at football games.”
- There is considerable scholarship help for college-bound students.
- The schools are safe.
- You are made to feel welcome when you visit a Kenton school.
- The elementary grade cards have been greatly improved - - you get much more information about your children.
- The schools do a good job of making their facilities available for community use.
- The teachers in the elementary schools make good use of volunteers.
- All-day kindergarten is an excellent program, and is especially beneficial to little boys. It should be free and available to all.
- There is a stable faculty and administration.
- The gifted program is strong at the elementary level.
- Vocational agriculture program is a strong local program.

WEAKNESSES OF KENTON CITY SCHOOLS

Following are the areas of weakness identified by focus group participants. Again these weakness areas are **NOT** listed in any order of importance.

- The Kenton community does not have a strong academic focus. Only about 25% of the graduates go on to any form of college. There is no strong community concern for academic achievement such as results on the Ohio Achievement Tests. Over 30% of children come from single-parent homes generally having low expectations. The high school only offers one advanced placement course (English), and participation in the PSEO program is discouraged. “There is more worry about football than academics”; “Kenton is known for its football team - - not academics.”
- The dress code needs to be strictly enforced - - especially at the high school. The use of duct tape to cover holes in clothing should be stopped - - the students need to be sent home to change clothing.
- There is a lack of respect for some teachers at the high school. They allow students to use profanity “They cuss out their teachers”. Some teachers try to be “buddies” with their students. “Some of the high school teachers need a dress code.” “They need to dress for respect”.
- There is a serious lack of discipline at both the high school and the middle school.
- There is an overemphasis on athletics - - especially football. “The football program is out of control”. There is the perception that football “runs the show” at the high school. Several comments were made that football players receive special treatment and privileges. Serious concern was expressed for the recent incident involving five students who also happened to be football players - - the “deer in the road”.
- Facilities need to be updated. “There are too many old buildings.”
- Teachers are given tenure too quickly (quicker than in other school districts) and the poor ones get protected and cannot be removed.
- Senior adults don’t feel connected to the schools; they need to be better informed.
- There has been a new \$25 school fee added to the \$100 school supply fee. Many parents can’t afford the expense. (NOTE: We were informed that if parents in need contact the “Helping Hands” organization they will receive assistance in paying.)

- Those who don't have children in school do not receive any form of school newsletter. Apparently no form of such communication even comes from the high school.
- Some expressed fear that if they complain about something there will be retribution on their children, in the classrooms and in athletics.
- The Board is only doing these focus groups because they want to pass a levy.
- Concern was expressed as to whether teachers were being evaluated by the building principals as often as required. Some perceived the "literary support leaders" doing this instead of the principals.
- The "gifted" programs end at 6th grade.
- Vocational programs other than vo-ag are not available locally. Students must travel to High Point Career Center, but many don't want to go there. "A career center is needed in the county".

RECOMMENDATIONS DERIVED FROM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS' IDENTIFICATION OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

- A “Blue Ribbon Task Force” should be established IMMEDIATELY to consider the perceived problems of control, discipline, and dress code at the high school and middle school. This task force should have representation from the community, from school administration, and from teachers.
- Make a very high priority of creating a “Community Advisory Council” which would meet on a regular basis, perhaps as often as monthly, and no less often than quarterly. It would be drawn from different segments of the community and would meet with the superintendent and at least one member of the Board of Education. It would act somewhat as a “focus group” for the board and administration, providing input on community perceptions, concerns, and school needs. This group would also be used as a “sounding board” for school plans and proposals. Membership should be rotating with fixed terms of community members.
- Work diligently with the local newspaper and radio station to develop some sort of forum to regularly communicate with the community. Perhaps a weekly (or bi-weekly) “Superintendent’s column”/spot which would run or air regularly. The focus should be on school news; explanation of actions; programs or procedures; upcoming events; and solicited ‘questions from the community’. Perhaps the radio version could feature a periodic “Call-in” program, and the newspaper column might feature a “question of the week”, etc.
- Work toward getting senior adults more involved with the schools. They can be classroom volunteers functioning as tutors; reading to students (or listening to students read to them); telling stories, etc. Have regularly scheduled “Grandparent Days” featuring lunches and a brief student program. Use school facilities for senior organizations to hold their meetings. The Board and administration should occasionally attend senior organization meetings to discuss school concerns and issues. Publicize and enforce the free admission policy for seniors to attend all school events. So many times seniors take the blame for defeating school levies and bond issues. We have found in our research that seniors are less positive about school issues than other age groups, but they are not more negative. They tend to answer in the “don’t know” choices, and as one senior focus group member

responded in one of our groups several years ago, “When I don’t know, I vote NO!”

- Send some form of school newsletter, regularly, to all residents of the community. Be sure that parents of kids at all levels (including high school) receive a newsletter from their kids’ school. Make those newsletters as attractive and colorful as possible to encourage readership of the SIMPLE TO UNDERSTAND and as INTERESTING AS POSSIBLE material they contain.
- Publicize the availability of the “Helping Hands” organization to assist in covering school costs for those in need.

ISSUES ENCOURAGING A “YES” VOTE ON A LEVY

Rank	Issue	Weighted Composite
1.	Knowing how the money will be spent and why it is needed	68
1.	Education is most important	68
3.	Addressing the issues raised by the public	45
4.	Being fiscally responsible	42
5.	Having a school board which is in control of the administration	40
6.	Having a more positive administration with communicated goals, not threats	36
7.	Having a levy run for a fixed period of time rather than “continuing”	24
8.	Having a campaign committee that represents the diversity of Kenton	21
9.	Identify those who vote and communicating with them (reaching older voters)	18.5
10.	Having an all-day free kindergarten for everyone	18
10.	The concept of “paying forward”	18

Other issues presented but getting less support from focus group members included: getting the elementary schools all on the same level; selling the land previously purchased following the last levy; seeing more parents get involved; having the schools willing to consider cuts in all areas; having the public feel more welcome at board meetings; and the strong extracurriculars – band, choir, the football team, etc.

DISCUSSION OF ISSUES ENCOURAGING A “YES” VOTE

The rank ordered positive issues (those which would influence a “yes” vote, on a levy or at least the consideration of such a vote) were a product of the six focus groups. The weighted composite for these issues was developed from the responses of the participants when they were asked to identify, in order, the three issues which they felt were the strongest influences toward casting a “yes” vote. For each time an issue was selected as the “single strongest positive issue” by a participant, that issue received three points; for each time an issue was selected as the “second strongest positive issue” by a participant, that issue received two points; and for each time an issue was selected as the “third strongest positive issue”, that issue received one point. Some participants had two issues tied for a position, and in calculating the totals the point value was split between those two issues. A weighting was used to allow for the fact that some issues were not mentioned until after the first focus group. (For example, since an issue surfaced by the second focus group was seen by five of the six groups and not by all six, the weighted composite of such an issue was increased to 1.2 times its calculated total.)

The tie for the top spot is between two issues which could generally be expected to be given by nearly all as topping the list of issues which would influence or encourage a “yes” vote.

In our extensive experience in dealing with situations similar to Kenton’s, it has nearly always been the case that respondents in focus groups (or in full-blown market analyses with samples of 300 or 400) will always identify having full information as to both WHY the money is needed and HOW it will be spent as the top positive issue. We have never seen this “give us information” issue finish lower than second among possible positive issues. Kenton is no different from the dozens of communities we have served in this respect. And this super-important issue really sets up our understanding of other positive, as well as negative, issues.

Simply put, people want to feel that they have whatever for them (and in their perception) is adequate information as to why they are being asked for more money by their schools and just how that money will be spent!

This finding points to an aspect of information that is often difficult to deal with. All too often school officials and campaign committees produce and

attempt to distribute or disseminate loads of pertinent information only to find a public which insists that they did not get adequate information! That is sometimes hard to swallow by hard-working school or campaign workers who KNOW that such information was indeed available only to be criticized for the lack of such information.

The reasons for this are numerous:

- 1) The information was not distributed effectively - - they indeed DIDN'T actually get it. Certainly this can happen. This points to a weakness in the distribution of the information which may have resulted from lack of an effective distribution plan. For example, a mailing to persons with kids in school would obviously miss the 70% or more persons in a typical community who have no kids in public school; a mailing to registered voters would obviously not go to persons not registered to vote. An item presented in a daily newspaper ad or in an advertising insert would not be received by those who do not get the paper - - or simply to those who chose not to read the paper that day or who missed the precise page or failed to see the insert.
- 2) The information was too complicated; or it was too dense; or the terms used in the information weren't commonly understood - - - too much educator "gobble-de-gook" which might work well in educator circles but leaves the common folks lost - - or even irritated at being given material that simply didn't mean anything to them.

Quite obviously, these two reasons for being "under-informed", or feeling mis-informed, can be deadly factors as people "claim" to want lots of information justifying the need for higher school taxes and understanding just how their money will be spent. Both of these factors will be more fully addressed later in our section of "recommendations" for use of a campaign committee.

- 3) They didn't WANT to know more about the issue. Common sense tells us that a person whose mind is closed (or darn near so) can easily dismiss without further attention any information with which they are likely to disagree (like a call for higher taxes!) Most forms of impersonal communication (flyers, ads in newspaper, even campaign brochures, etc.) can easily be ignored by a person who simply isn't interested, or is opposed, to the object of that ad or brochure. This weakness will also be addressed in that "recommendations" section.

The issue that “Education is important” is sort of an apple pie and motherhood matter. Few would disagree (we hope) that there is a correlation between adequate education and quality of life. Although this rather general appeal should always be found at the heart of much of the promotion of a school levy, it will seldom be effectively used by itself as a sufficient reason for voting “yes”.

The matter of “Addressing the issues raised by the public” gets to the heart of a significant proportion of the resistance to voting higher taxes to operate the Kenton City Schools. As our analysis of the “Negative Issues” will address, there is a quite understandable feeling that the best way to encourage people to support a tax levy is to show them IN A CLEAR AND UNDERSTANDABLE WAY that those negative issues (at least those which can be considered under the control of Kenton City Schools) are being recognized and are being addressed!

“Being fiscally responsible” as a positive issue is actually a rather strong compliment for the way the financial affairs of the schools are being conducted. The relative absence of charges that Kenton schools are wasting money is another testimony to the generally strong support which is given to the current handling of public money to run the schools. This is a major issue to use in asking for additional funding - - - the “We have done a frugal and careful job of spending your money” theme should resonate through any upcoming campaign - - - again coupled with an effort to communicate the need for more, the uses of it, and the way(s) the schools are responding to concerns and issues perceived by the community - - - as many of those are enumerated and presented in the analysis of the “weaknesses” of Kenton schools addressed earlier.

The next two issues identified as “positives” by the focus group members are actually negatives turned inside out. The identification as a positive issue of “Having a school board which is in control of the administration” as well as “Having a more positive administration with communicated goals - - not threats” are both examples of a community group (the focus group participants) which has lost some of its confidence in central administration, the leadership at the high school - - and likely the middle school as well - - and ultimately the Board. They are saying “Get in control of the situation” (again as presented in the earlier discussion of the “weaknesses”) straighten things out and come to us with positive goals; and sound plans for achieving them.

The issue of “Having a levy run for a fixed period of time rather than be “continuing” is a cry for more control. Although it is very logical to presume that a need now will not simply disappear in five years, the political fact, and advantage, of offering voters a tax increase which they may re-evaluate some time in the future is a strong persuader in requesting support. Then too there is the fact that a continuing levy was rejected by such a large margin in May! Although many will simply reject a request for more taxes under any circumstances for any length of time, for many people the perception of an opportunity to revisit the need is appealing enough to swing a negative vote to a positive.

“Having a campaign committee that represents the diversity of Kenton” is a no-brainer as a positive issue. As will be spelled out in our recommendations related to any upcoming campaign, the structure and composition of an effective campaign committee is critical. This must be a group which can speak, really speak, to the several demographic segments of the community both in geography and in such areas as age, income levels, education and socio-economic levels. Recruiting such a diverse committee and setting them to the necessary tasks is always a challenge. More will be said on this matter in the section on “recommendations”.

The matter of “identifying those who vote and communicating with them/reaching the older voters” is crucial and can only be considered as a “positive” matter if it can be accomplished. We all know and understand that as age levels increase, the likelihood of voting increases. Certainly this makes the older voter a very crucial segment of voters - - and a high-priority subject for campaign efforts. Again more to come on this topic as we develop the “recommendations”

“Having an all-day kindergarten free for everyone” is an interesting issue. It is our understanding that this was to be one of the areas in which funds were to be used had the May levy passed. In an area with a substantial number of families with one parent and limited incomes, this issue can become important.

The concept of “Paying forward” showed up among the “Top 10” positive issues. That is at least mildly encouraging since it is one of the most effective tools in seeking to convince a senior resident to support a school matter. The concept, often not fully understood, was presented perhaps 30 or

more years ago, by Ohio State football coaching legend Woody Hayes, in a formal address. Perhaps Coach Hayes is the original author of the concept, perhaps not, but he articulated it well with words somewhat like this, “We cannot pay back those persons who created things for us; those who provided for us when we were young - - they are gone, dead. The only way we can repay them is to ‘pay forward’, to provide for those who come after us the way those who came before us provided for us.” It is a perfect argument for a thinking person who believes that since they (and/or their children or even grandchildren) are no longer in the local schools that they have no reason - - or obligation - - to support them. Once again, this and several of the leading “positive” issues will appear in campaign recommendations to come.

The other issues noted in the table of “Yes” vote encouragements are presented for information only. Although each was suggested by a participant in one of the six focus groups, when participants were asked to select their top three, these other issues failed to get enough support to finish in the top 10 or so.

ISSUES ENCOURAGING A “NO” VOTE ON A LEVY

Rank	Issue	Weighted Composite
1.	Can't afford new taxes	53
2.	Discipline problems in the schools	38
3.	Miscommunication from the schools	36
4.	Lack of community concern for academics	33
5.	Lack of communication between school board and community	30
6.	Dissatisfaction with current superintendent and high school principal	27.5
7.	Lack of moral examples from teachers	27
8.	Overpaid administrators	26.4
9.	Dress code needed and enforced	23.5
10.	Perceptions of problems with football team	23
11.	Overemphasis on football	16.8

Other issues presented but getting less support from focus group members included: As soon as the last levy passed, the money was spent on salaries; dissatisfaction with Kenton's Ohio achievement test scores; using threats; having other levies on the ballot; not enough teacher evaluations by responsible administrators; School Board's purchase of land from the last levy; overpaid teachers; school fees out of control; lack of diversity education and participation; concerns about having a “campus school”; too many “home grown” faculty; having a head coach also be athletic director; not enough “home grown” faculty; the number of children home-schooled; and drug problems.

DISCUSSION OF ISSUES ENCOURAGING A “NO” VOTE

The ranking of the issues most likely to encourage a “No” vote on a levy was done in the exact manner described in the discussion of the top issues encouraging a “Yes” vote.

At the top of the list of issues most likely to encourage a person to vote “No” on a school tax levy is the ever-present matter of not wanting to pay more in taxes. This feeling is so natural and so wide-spread that is an assumption which can always be made at the outset of any school funding effort. It remains for the campaign to convince voters (at least over 50% of them) to find reasons to overcome this natural reluctance.

The key(s) to doing this are found in one of two general ways:

- 1) Acquainting the community with the positive issues - - - and stressing them in the hope of presenting an argument in their behalf which will overcome the natural reluctance to vote higher taxes on themselves.
- 2) Addressing as many of the negative issues as possible in such a way as to convince many in the community (hopefully many of them voters) that there are positive steps being taken to make corrections - - to make changes; and to make things better. Some of these negative hurdles to overcome will be found as we look further at the ranking of these issues; some of them have been presented earlier in our discussion of the “weaknesses” of Kenton schools.

“Discipline problems in the schools” finished very near the top of likely issues encouraging a “No” vote. It finished in a higher rank among negative issues than we have perhaps ever found in our years of research in communities and schools. Discussion of those concerns among focus group participants was frequent, often lively, and aroused heavy emotions on several occasions. The focal point of the discipline concerns was the high school with a significant amount of concern being expressed for the middle school as well. But the target was overwhelmingly the high school which was painted by some as lacking any semblance of control. Some of the dimensions of this are addressed in the “weaknesses”. It was addressed in our “recommendations” stemming from the “strengths and weaknesses” of Kenton schools - - - the “Task Force” on this problem.

The issue of “miscommunication from the schools” is one of “lack of” as much if not more than “incorrect” information. There seems to be a rather frequently recognized gap - - with a resultant decrease in credibility - - between what many believe they are hearing from their schools and what they WANT to hear. Some of this concern can be laid at the door of the pattern (and even the existence) of effective newsletter-type contact between the schools and the community. An urgent addressing of the newsletter matter is a part of our “recommendations” section.

The “Lack of community concern for academics” was an eye-opener for us. It is difficult for us to recall any community among the more than 60 in which we have done school district market analysis over the past 30 years in which we have heard so little in focus groups about the academic side of their schools. There was almost nothing mentioned about the role or the achievements of anything academic among the recognized “strengths” of Kenton schools. We heard of the numerous financial scholarship aids provided for seniors which are available; we heard of the perceived low proportion of graduates who go on the college; we heard virtually nothing of academic achievements! It may be significant that this perceived lack of concern for academic achievements strikes our focus group participants as a strong factor in encouraging a “no” vote. This may be an expression of hope that the community will become more supportive of academics.

The issue of “Lack of communication between school board and community” again reflects at least a politically-correct thirst for more information coming from the Board. This may be a reflection of a somewhat hit-or-miss school newsletter pattern. Certainly it should not be considered a reproach of the Board for hiding their decisions since this Board has live televised meetings - - - something very rarely found among school districts of our knowledge. Perhaps a better promotion of those live programs is in order.

The issue of “Dissatisfaction with current superintendent and high school principal” is a direct reflection and expression of the perception of an “out-of-control” high school. The majority of these specific criticisms from focus group participants was directed at the high school principal - - again as an expression of many perceptions of lack of control - - - as addressed earlier in our discussion of “weaknesses”

Yet another expression of the perceived loss of control comes from the issue of “lack of moral examples from teachers”. These came with numerous anecdotal complaints directed at both dress and behavior.

The issue of “Overpaid administrators” is nearly always on the list of top negative issues as we have done such market research work around the state. It generally lands higher on the list of top negatives than it did among our focus group participants. Some of the negative sentiment expressed here dealt with “double-dipping” rather than totally with the actual levels of compensation.

The need for a “Dress code - - - and enforcement” was heard loud and clear. And it was addressed as needed for both students and teachers. Again this is tied closely with the perception of out-of-control situations in the high school and middle school.

The final two issues to make our participants’ top lists of negatives dealt with football. Much of this issue has been identified in the earlier treatment of “weaknesses”. It is another issue tied to the perceptions of loss of control as much as matters of favoritism. The recent developments stemming from what we refer to as the “deer” incident and its repercussions is something of a flashpoint for criticisms directed at football. However it may be presented, and however fair or unfair it may be, for a significant number these situations will be a deterrent to support for added funding for the school.

The other issues noted in the table of “No” vote encouragements are presented for information only. Although each was suggested by a participant in one of the six focus groups, when participants were asked to select their top three, the strength of these issues was not adequate to allow it to finish among the strongest of negative issues.

HYPOTHETICAL VOTING SITUATIONS PRESENTED TO FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Situation #1: If an election were held today and you were asked to vote on an increase of .75% (three-quarters of one percent) in the School District Income Tax for the operation of Kenton City Schools. This increase would be continuing and would not require a renewal.

Projected “Yes” vote for this option: 22.7%

Situation #2: If an election were held today and you were asked to vote on an increase of .75% (three-quarters of one percent) in the School District Income Tax for the operation of Kenton City Schools. This increase would be for a period of five years and would then be presented to voters before it would continue beyond five years.

Projected “Yes” vote for this option: 36.2%

Situation #3: If an election were held today and you were asked to vote on an increase of approximately 6.2 mills in Property Tax for the operation of Kenton City Schools. This increase would be continuing and would not require a renewal.

Projected “Yes” vote for this option: 7.8%

Situation #4: If an election were held today and you were asked to vote on an increase of approximately 6.2 mills in Property Tax for the operation of Kenton City Schools. This increase would be for a period of five years and would then be presented to voters before it would continue beyond five years.

Projected “Yes” vote for this option: 16.2%

DISCUSSION OF VOTING ALTERNATIVES PRESENTED TO FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

In an effort to determine which among several possible appeals for added funding might have the best chance of success among voters of the Kenton community, we closed each of the six focus groups with a brief description of a hypothetical voting situation. The phrasing of each situation is shown on the preceding page.

Using a technique which gives the respondent seven response options ranging from “I would CERTAINLY VOTE FOR the issue” to “I would CERTAINLY VOTE AGAINST the issue”, we were able to project what the likely outcome of such a vote would have been if conducted solely among the members of the six focus groups. We have used this technique for several years to help predict likely voting results where a school district is considering more than one alternative types of taxes.

The first situation presented was deliberately that which Kenton voters turned down in May. It was included to allow us to measure how similar our focus group participants were to those persons who voted in May. When we applied our formula for predicting a vote based on the several response options to the first situation, we predicted a “Yes” vote of just 22.7%. Since the actual “Yes” vote in May was approximately 28%, we concluded that the sample of Kenton voters in our six focus groups was skewed somewhat negative. This conclusion is helpful in analysis of responses to the other three hypothetical voting situations presented to our participants. There is no guarantee of a straight adjustment upward of the approximately 5% difference between May and our focus group “voters” of early August. It is likely that a somewhat higher “Yes” vote for the other three hypothetical situations might be expected due to the slight negative skew of focus group participants.

Some conclusions from an analysis of the three other hypothetical voting situations presented to our focus group participants:

- 1) Clearly a levy set to run for a fixed period of time would have a much greater chance of acceptance by the Kenton voters.
- 2) Clearly an income tax increase would have a much greater likelihood of passing than either a continuing or a fixed-period increase in property tax.

What is the likelihood of getting voter approval of an increase of .75% (three-quarters of one percent) in the School District Income Tax for a period of five years?

The projected “Yes” vote of 36.2% to the hypothetical voting situation is obviously not 50% or above. However it is much closer to 50% than the level of support found in the May election. Let us assume a slightly higher level of support from the overall general population of voters in Kenton than we found among the focus group “voters”. This assumption comes from the somewhat negative skew of the focus group members. Thus the beginning point - - - BEFORE ANY FORM OF CAMPAIGN - - - could be closer to 40%) if the Board changes from a **continuing** tax to one with a **fixed (five year) time period**.

In our many years of measuring community support for school funding efforts and predicting voting outcomes prior to the beginning of a campaign period, we have found several principles:

- 1) A pre-campaign prediction of 50% or higher for any new tax levy is almost NEVER to be found;
- 2) A pre-campaign prediction of 45% or higher can be declared a **very likely winner** GIVEN AN ACTIVE AND INTENSIVE CAMPAIGN WITH A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF DEDICATED VOLUNTEER WORKERS;
- 3) A pre-campaign prediction of 40% - 45% can be declared a **somewhat likely winner** again GIVEN AN ACTIVE AND INTENSIVE CAMPAIGN WITH THAT SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF DEDICATED VOLUNTEER WORKERS; the need for that intensive campaign - - and for increased numbers of those dedicated volunteer workers - - of course becomes more critical the further from 50% the forecast is;
- 4) A pre-campaign prediction of 35% - 39% is seen as in a **high risk** Area. Success here calls for an even more intensive campaign and even more volunteer workers;
- 5) A pre-campaign prediction of 30% - 34% is in the **very high risk** or **unlikely to succeed** range.

The single greatest increase from a **projected** voting outcome to an **actual** voting outcome following a campaign which we have ever seen or experienced is a gain of 22%.

There are times when a school district must continue to “knock on the door” by asking for financial support in the face of almost certain defeat. There are also times when a request for additional tax support in the face of a very low predicted positive vote may be appropriate. Those would include:

- 1) Knowing that a small army of volunteers can be recruited and used in the campaign;
- 2) Discovery through market research of significant areas which can and will be addressed - - i.e., finding some serious misperceptions in the community which can easily be addressed; or finding negative issues which lend themselves to aggressive corrective efforts which are anticipated to impact many voters in such a way as to change their voting behavior.

Note: It is possible that through some of the recommended actions which have come from our focus group research, a perception of “Significant change is coming - - is on the way” may be able to bring about a rapid shift. In all likelihood such changes in perceptions, attitudes, and voting behavior will come at a slower pace. Voters are often found to want to wait for the results.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING AND CONDUCTING A SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN

The task of developing and conducting a successful campaign can be a daunting one. This is particularly true for a community like Kenton where (prior to the somewhat limited efforts and organization in the campaign prior to the May election) there has not been a true and hard-fought campaign for more than a decade.

Since there has been a form of community market research activity (the focus group project) much of the “**marching orders**” for a campaign in Kenton should come from results of that market analysis. Thus it is imperative that the top positive issues surfaced in the focus groups be emphasized in a campaign - - - and that the top negative issues be addressed as well. Those two lists of issues must be the guiding force in development of all campaign materials (brochure, ads, etc.) and activities.

We have provided multiple copies of the Phi Delta Kappa fastback publication, “Successful Strategies for Marketing School Levies” which was authored by Glenn Graham, Gordon Wise, and Duane Bachman. Although it is somewhat dated, the experience-based recommendations it contains are as valid as if it had been written today. This little book is written to help guide efforts at getting input from a community, organizing a vigorous campaign, and putting into place a wide array of tactics for gaining voter support. Please understand that it would be nearly impossible to implement EVERY tactic recommended in the book. Few campaigns that we have known, or been associated with, have come close to putting **all** of these tools in place. Time, the number of volunteers, and funds available generally dictate how much of this ideal full-blown effort can be realistically used. We do, however, recommend that this book be used as a **blueprint** for developing the most vigorous campaign possible.

Here are some strong recommendations drawn both from the focus group research done in Kenton and from our many years of experience consulting to campaigns for levies and bond issues.

- Begin **immediately** to recruit key leadership for the campaign. As we discussed on Friday, August 4, a search for the following key spots (as these are described in the Phi Delta Kappa fastback) must now be underway:

- A. **Campaign chair/co-chairs**; See the fastback (pp. 25-26) for a more detailed listing of duties of these persons. This is the single most critical position in the campaign organization. In our experience we find that women make ideal chairs or co-chairs. For whatever reason(s) they seem to be more effective in lining up workers, twisting the necessary arms, and in general getting things up and running - - and keeping them doing so. Ideal campaign chairs are well-known (and hopefully well-respected) in the community. They are not “figureheads” or “honorary chairs”. They are persons willing to commit many weeks to a grass roots effort and work hard at the task to which they have been “called”. This person(s) will chair weekly meetings of the “Steering Committee” (composed of all the chairs and captains described here and below) which should begin in late August or early September. He/she will be the “spokesman” for the campaign to any and all media.
- B. **Chair of the Residential Committee** (this is the most critical post other than the position of Campaign Chairs). Again he or she must be “connected” and know persons throughout the school district. This person will then help the Campaign Chair(s) in recruiting a series of - - -
- C. **Ward and Township Captains.** Each of the four wards in Kenton will need a person who is in charge of contacts made in that area. Each of the Townships in the school district will likewise need a person in charge. When these positions are filled, the appropriate Ward or Township Captain (with the assistance of the Residential Chair) will recruit a series of - - -
- D. **Precinct Captains.** These persons will then have the responsibility (with the assistance of their Ward or Township Captain) of recruiting from within their precinct as many as possible - - -
- E. **Neighborhood Captains.** These persons will then recruit as many as possible - - -
- F. **Neighborhood Volunteers.** These persons, with the help of their neighborhood, precinct, and ward/township captains, will then be the small army which will attempt to make a personal contact with as many households in the school

district community as can possibly be reached during the campaign.

A note of encouragement and caution: It is nearly impossible to reach 100% of all residences in the school district with the personal contact which is so vital for a successful campaign. The key is to make the greatest effort to reach the most homes possible! Don't expect perfection in coverage; do expect to make a maximum effort to reach all that is humanly, and realistically, possible with the kind of personal contact which is needed.

So much of the success of a levy campaign depends on the successful recruiting of a significant group of volunteers willing to work "in the trenches" - - - the neighborhoods - - - with direct contact made. In this direct contact, the volunteer would attempt to point out to each person he/she contacts the key items in a campaign brochure and encourage each person contacted to acquaint themselves with the issues before making a decision.

- Begin work immediately on a campaign brochure. This brochure should be not longer than four pages (one 11 X 17 page printed on both sides and folded to make a four-page booklet. The two pieces used in May contain much good information - - perhaps too much. A question-answer format is appropriate. In providing information on where the money will go and why it is needed (the #1 positive issue from the focus groups) a pair of pie charts might be considered, One of those would focus on the proportion of school expenditures going to each area (and acknowledging the 83% which goes to salaries and benefits, etc.). The other would present a picture of where the funds for school operation come from (Local property taxes; state assistance; etc.). Other question-answers should address some of the leading "issues raised by the public". Such topics as the perception of the high school and middle school's being "out of control" (as the question) and the creation of a blue-ribbon Task Force to address the precise issues which cause this perception - - (as the answer to the question about the loss of control in those schools). It should stress the savings from the cuts made in 2004 (\$600,000 per year) as hard evidence of the fiscal responsibility of the Board in spending the tax money provided by the community. Other questions could focus on plans to expand the school newsletters (in response to a question posed about insufficient communication from the schools). This is an

opportunity to introduce the plan to develop a “Community Advisory Council” which would meet regularly with the Superintendent and a Board member to provide ongoing input from the community. This brochure will be the major piece of campaign material. It will be carried and used to the hilt by all campaign volunteers in their neighborhood contacts; it will be found in public places where it may be picked up by a few; it may be mailed directly to all registered voters; it may be included as an “insert” in the local paper a few days before the election, etc.

- Prepare, after meeting with the local media, a series of soft news articles which would address some of the concerns coming from the community as well as some of the strengths of the Kenton schools. Some possible topics/titles for this series of releases might be:

“Kenton City Schools Asking for More Tax Support: What Gives?”

“Blue Ribbon Task Force Created to Deal with Control and Discipline Issues at High School and Middle School”

“Could Kenton Schools Be Setting an Area Record for the Longest Time Between Increase in Local Tax Revenue?”

“What a Successful Football Program Means to Kenton City Schools”

“A Model of Fiscal Responsibility: Kenton City Schools”
(Blow your horn here, loud and clear)

“A School Tax Levy for a Fixed Time vs. a Continuing Levy - - What is the Real Difference?”

“What Stake Do Older Voters Have in Public Schools - - What Does it Mean to ‘Pay Forward’?”

“Strong Schools and Property Values - - What’s the Relationship?”

“All-Day Kindergarten for All Kids! A Blessing Coming to Kenton City Schools?”

“The Pros and Cons of a School Dress Code - - What Gives?”

“Kenton Schools Actually Wanted to Hear from Us?” (This would be a soft news story on the focus groups and how they unearthed many issues and problems that the Board and administration have **taken to heart** and are now **beginning to address.**)

These are just a few possible topics which lend themselves to development as a soft news/feature story for the local newspaper. They should be brief (500 words maximum) and as informal as possible. A contact with the Editor of the local paper should be made to determine if such a “series” would be accepted for publication. Expect that these pieces will be edited prior to publication. They should **NOT** make any attempt at campaigning. This is not their purpose. They are targeted to **inform** the community of matters which should be of community interest.

Doing the task outlined above requires someone with some writing skills. If the district had a “School – Community Relations” person on staff, this assignment would come to that person. Kenton does not have such a person at present. (Note: Such a staff position would be a tremendous asset to the schools and to the community, and not just at levy time. For longer range planning, would it be possible for Kenton, together with one or two other schools in the county, to create such a position to be shared by the two or more school districts?) In the absence of such a person, these pieces might be developed by a teacher, or any person in the community, who has some writing skills.

- Determine whether there is a reasonable opportunity to contact persons in the community who have the opportunity to support the kids and the schools without any increase in taxes for themselves (those who live in subsidized housing and who have no wages or income subject to a School District Income Tax). There are ways that this might be done to the benefit of all, but such efforts would have to be conducted prior to 30 days before any election date. We will be happy to provide more detailed instruction of ways to do this.
- Determine from the editor of the local paper if a “School Levy Question and Answer of the Day” could be developed and run on the front page daily during the three weeks prior to election day. Ideally

- the same question/answer could be a part of one or more newscasts on the local radio station each day during that same period.
- Begin immediately to raise funds for a campaign. Costs of printing, postage, yard signs, media advertising and supplies are not cheap. The single biggest variable is in media advertising where the costs can be high (in some cases prohibitive).
 - Be certain that anything which is used in the campaign (in a brochure; in media ads; etc.) is directly related to one or more of the most important positive or the most important negative issues as identified by focus group participants.
 - Be ready and eager to claim some political advantage for having “listened” to the community following the May defeat. (See the recommended feature story on the focus groups.)
 - Appoint a person or two to organize and recruit and coordinate persons who will write Letters to the Editor on behalf of the levy campaign during the two-three weeks prior to the election.
 - Set up an immediate meeting with the editor of the local paper and management of the local radio station. Recall the several items above which would utilize local media - - particularly the paper. It is important to meet with these people to determine such things as: Will they permit some of the items we have mentioned to be used? Will they “endorse” the levy when it is next presented? What kind of advertising rates will they charge the campaign committee? They are some key participants in a successful campaign.
 - In all contacts and discussions with local media as recommended at several points here, the campaign committee Chair (or an appropriate Co-Chair) should be the “point person” for the campaign organization.

NOTE: As we have already promised, we (Graham and Wise) are available and willing to come to Kenton in September and conduct a rigorous training session for volunteers. This service would be at NO CHARGE to the Kenton schools other than mileage.

FIGURE #1: OVERVIEW OF STRENGTHS OF KENTON SCHOOLS

- Good teachers
- Good fiscal management
- Plenty of opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities
- Strong school spirit
- Considerable scholarship money for college bound
- Safe schools
- Made to feel welcome at schools
- Improved elementary grade cards
- Facilities are available for community use
- Elementary teachers make good use of volunteers
- All-day kindergarten is excellent
- Stable faculty and administration
- Strong “gifted” programs at elementary schools
- Strong vocational agricultural program

FIGURE #2: OVERVIEW OF WEAKNESSES OF KENTON SCHOOLS

- Not a strong academic community - - there is greater emphasis on athletics - - especially football
- Dress code needs to be enforced
- Use of profanity by some high school students toward teachers
- Lack of discipline at high school and middle school
- Facilities need to be updated
- Teachers given tenure too quickly
- Senior adults don't feel connected to schools
- Many cannot afford new \$25 school fee in addition to \$100 school supplies bill
- Those without children in schools receive no form of school newsletter; no apparent newsletter from the high school
- Fear of retribution to children if you complain
- Doing focus groups only to get a levy passed
- Are teachers being evaluated by the building principal as often as required?
- No gifted program after 6th grade
- No vocational programs here except vo-ag