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JOURNAL

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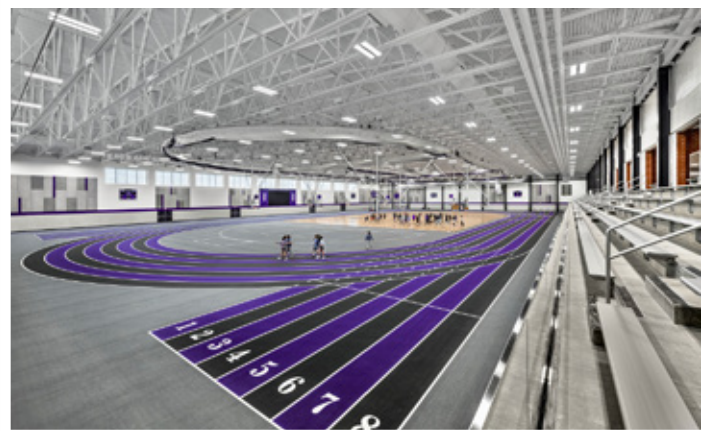
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The Economics of **SCHOOL REFERENDUMS**

By Steve Corona, ISBA President, Fort Wayne Community Schools Board of Trustees



Steve Klink hasn't slept in 36 hours. This is crunch time for him.

Steve, the owner of First Tuesday Communications, advises school districts considering a referendum in November, and they want his advice regarding the exact language they should have when this action item comes before them at their June school board

meetings. School districts must submit their proposed request to the Department of Local Government Finance no later than July 22.

Significantly more school corporations than in the past are pursuing a referendum this fall. The reasons are no secret. Property tax reforms unleashed by Senate Enrolled Act 1 (2025) are reducing local education funding by millions of dollars. In addition, school corporations are now limited to conducting referenda only in general elections every two years.

An Indiana Coalition for Public Education (ICPE) survey of our state's school districts found the following: "The survey — completed by 148 of the state's 290 traditional public school corporations — found that 95.3% of Indiana districts expect SEA 1 to negatively affect their funding in 2025, and 99.3% expect impacts in future years."

Klink is based in Lafayette but works with school district across Indiana. His consulting work also includes school districts that will use General Obligation bonds to cover rising costs. This approach is commonly known as the 1028 method. One of his clients is the school district next door to my district, East Allen County

Schools. The school board has one heck of a challenge in making ends meet; It is one of the largest school corporations in geographic size in the state. School consolidation in the 1960's brought 10 small communities together to form EACS. Five high schools are situated in the largest communities, and each town values its school. As other districts consider school closings, that will never happen in East Allen. Their challenge, then, is to continually examine their expenditures.

Tim Hines, EACS board president, says Klink has offered invaluable assistance beginning with detailed polls that found out the opinions and thoughts of school patrons. The district lost a construction referendum in 2012. In 2017, EACS used lease rental

bonds to fund \$87.5 million in capital projects, and again in 2025 for \$192.4 million in additional capital projects. Because no signatures were submitted to the county clerk opposing the bonds, they did not go to referendum.

Last year, Hobart Schools passed a referendum with 81% of voters supporting the ask for more money. Superintendent Dr. Peggy Buffington said the key to the strong support was never saying no to a speaking request, especially when the audience members were senior citizens. Dr. Buffington has been Hobart's superintendent for 19 years, and people trust

in her leadership. The Lake County school district in Northwest Indiana operates three elementary schools, a middle school, and one high school. The district's student enrollment is just over 4,000 students. Buffington tells me they may have to ask voters for additional financial support in the very near future. Klink believes the district is considering this action in 2028.

Hines said "communication is very important, no matter what method of funding you choose. Being honest and transparent with your stakeholders will be the best form of marketing you can have.

95%
OF INDIANA
SCHOOL DISTRICTS
EXPECT SEA 1 TO
NEGATIVELY AFFECT
THEIR FUNDING

SOURCE:
INDIANA COALITION FOR
PUBLIC EDUCATION

Hold community meetings that identify not only the reasons for the bond but also propose a responsible solution that addresses those needs.” He added, “when people feel included in the process, they tend to take ownership of it, which will lead to a yes vote on election day.”

The additional advice, then, to board members is to make sure there is unanimous consent in support of the funding request to voters. If a member is hesitant about the ask for funds, the board president and superintendent must understand the member’s reluctance. If the member believes the referendum request is more than homeowners can afford, consider a lesser amount. In a previous column, I wrote about our district’s defeat on a referendum vote, as we asked for too much. We should have taken the advice of the one member who expressed deep reservations about the amount but voted to support the action. I saw the result as a reason for me to step down as board president and encouraged him to lead the board. He did. Future referendum requests were for less money and for repairing our buildings.

Finally, I was surprised to learn that cities, counties, and school districts don’t always take the same side on proposed legislation. Most often you found the parties divided. On one side are school board members and superintendents represented by the Indiana School Boards Association (ISBA) and the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents (IAPSS). More than 460 cities and counties are represented by Accelerate Indiana Municipalities (AIM). The property tax changes enabled by Senate Enrolled Act 1 may be the piece of legislation that brings all parties together. School superintendents are advising school patrons of laying off teachers, closing schools, and ending or

reducing bus transportation. Mayors and county commissioners are also telling constituents about cutbacks in city and county services. Senate Enrolled Act 1 may be the reason your garbage service will move from a bi-weekly basis rather than every week. The number of police officers and firefighters may see a freeze on hiring. These decisions will not be well received by voters. If so, I sure hope our groups representing us under the Statehouse dome will join forces to provide schools and local governments with relief. 🎓



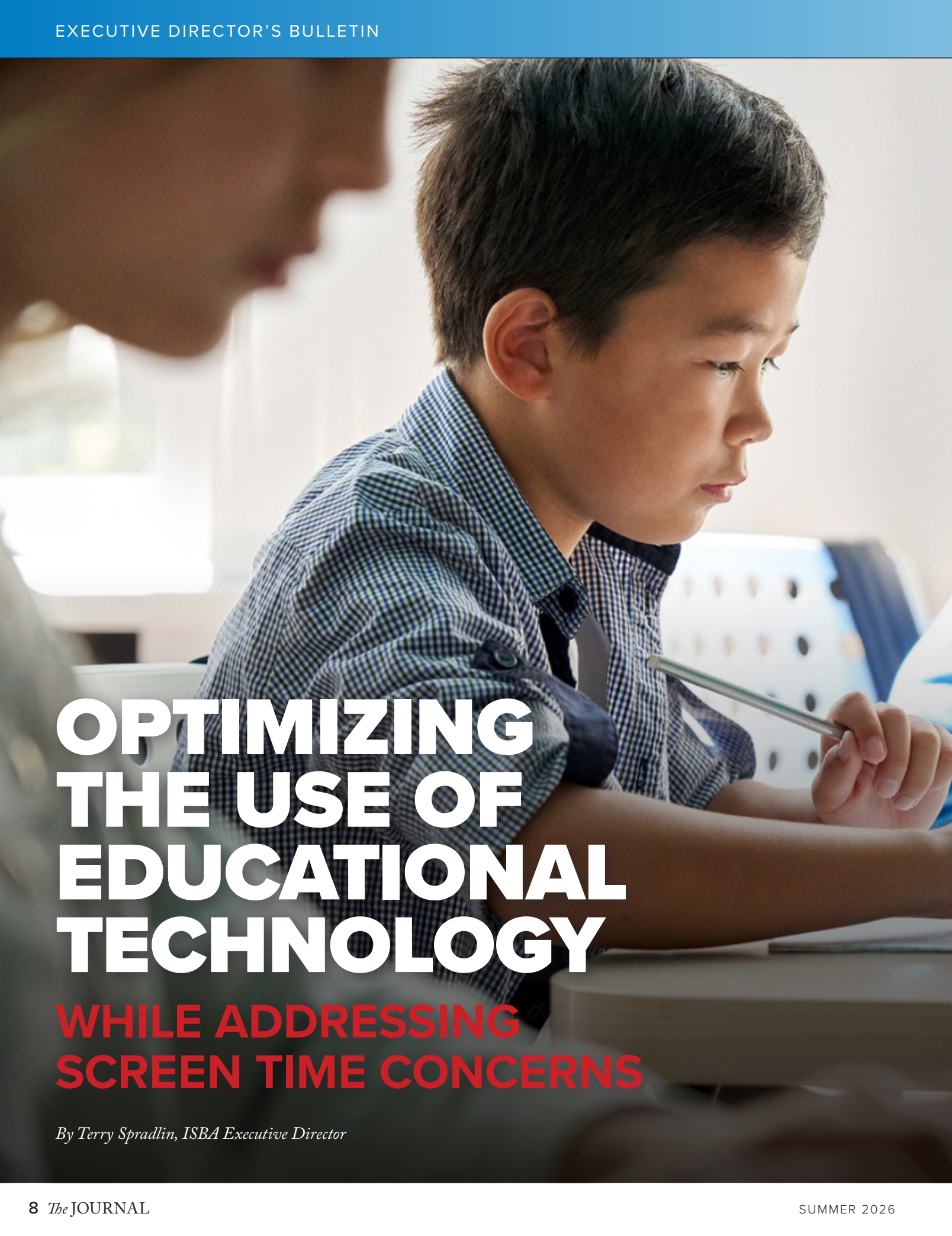
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OPTIMIZING THE USE OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

**WHILE ADDRESSING
SCREEN TIME CONCERNS**

By Terry Spradlin, ISBA Executive Director



The Indiana School Boards Association and our partner organizations are in full gear conducting the annual summer seminar series to provide continuous learning and professional development opportunities for our members. Summer also marks a time for ISBA's

Awards, Nominating, and Legislative Committees to gather to do important governance work of the association. The Legislative Committee comprised of 20 board members, two from each of ISBA's 10 regions, will convene for an in-person meeting in late July to consider current and emerging K-12 education policy issues to develop 2027 Legislative Priorities. What budgetary, instructional, and/or governance issues are of highest priority to your school district today and how can the Indiana General Assembly work to support your mission to elevate student achievement outcomes? I welcome your input and suggestions at: tspradlin@isba-ind.org. Any input received will be presented to the Legislative Committee for review when it meets.

Without question, given that the 2027 session is a budget session, school funding will be a top priority. Similarly, as the property tax reform law (SEA 1-2025) continues toward full implementation, its impact on school districts and other local units of government is becoming increasingly challenging. Meanwhile, I am hearing speculation of another round of property tax cuts may be considered. In response, ISBA will continue to advocate for replacement revenues like the option to raise local income taxes provided to county and municipal governments. Furthermore, I anticipate more discussion around improving and elevating work-based learning, apprenticeships, and career advising programming for secondary students.

While all these issues are significant, perhaps the topic presently receiving the most attention at the state and national levels is the impact of technology screen time on children. Representative Jake Teshka, House District 7, submitted a request to the Legislative Council of the Indiana General Assembly to assign an evaluation of technology use in classrooms to the Interim Study Committee on Education.

While this request was declined, his request has generated much discussion and media coverage. At the federal level, Congress has held hearings on the issue and the U.S. Surgeon General in May issued an advisory on the harms of screen use. The emergence of the debate on screen time impact on children comes on the heels of the passage of Senate Enrolled Act 78 (Public Law 107-2026), which imposes a “bell-to-bell no cell” ban of the use of non-school sanctioned wireless communication devices during the school day.

As school districts work to implement a “no device” policy or a storage policy to comply with the “bell-to-bell no cell” ban for the upcoming school year, a heightened attention is now turning to the impact of device screen time on students. The backdrop to this conversation is the Information Age world we live in and the rapid workforce changes that are being prompted by the artificial intelligence revolution. A key question has become, “Is the school-issued device (laptop, Chromebook, or iPad) an essential learning tool or a non-essential student distraction?” Similarly, another question being posed is, “Have classroom teachers become overly dependent on devices as a core instructional technique?” As these questions are examined by policymakers, parents, and educators, there is increasing media coverage across the nation on a

growing backlash on screen time usage by children. Headlines are spotlighting efforts of parents calling for “screen breaks” or all out bans on school-sanctioned devices in the classroom. Let us look at the pros and cons of 1:1 device use and consider the perspectives of our school leaders and classroom teachers.

SCREEN TIME CONCERNS

Emerging concerns about the reliance on school-issued devices by students posit that the devices are a distraction to students during class, students misuse them by searching or finding inappropriate online content (e.g., unfiltered YouTube videos), they result in excessive screen time by students in school and out of school, and that heavy screen time on devices contributes to mental health issues.

In May, the U.S. Surgeon General’s Office and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a new advisory, “Surgeon General’s Warning on the Harms of Screen Use,” that speaks to the harmful effects of excessive screen time for children and adolescents including poor sleep, anxiety, depression, and diminishing academic performance. The advisory also states that excessive screen time is also associated with other physical



As school districts work to implement SEA 78 that imposes the “BELL-TO-BELL NO CELL” ban, a heightened attention is now turning to the impact of device screen time on students.

health risks, including poor dietary habits. The advisory cites research that too much screen use and harmful content can interfere with language development, cognitive skill building, and cognitive capacity.ⁱ It adds that increased screen-related distraction (“technoference”) may reduce opportunities for social interaction, particularly in younger children.ⁱⁱ Adolescents who use media during face-to-face interactions tend to have lower feelings of mental well-being.ⁱⁱⁱ (page 16: U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory: Surgeon General’s Warning on the Harms of Screen Use). A stated purpose of the advisory and companion tool kit is “to provide a straightforward summary of the latest research findings and with recommendations to translate this information into action to better protect America’s children and adolescents from screen harms.”^{iv}

An Indianapolis Star opinion column (Sadia Khatri, April 12, 2026) suggests that in some elementary classrooms, technology use is offered as a reward. There is also a growing concern of curriculum mirroring gamification – where learning turns into a game in which students prioritize leveling up and earning points. Jeremy Forest Price, an assistant professor at the Indiana University-Indianapolis School of Education, commented to the columnist, “It sets up an expectation that free time is associated with screen time. One of the dangers of gamification is that kids learn that fast is better and thinking is bad...it often teaches kids that learning is something to be conquered rather than explored.”^v

1:1 DEVICE BENEFITS

Schools and educators must find the essential balance of technology integration in the classroom to ensure safe, supportive, and beneficial uses of technology for students. In a letter submitted on January 13, 2026, to the leadership of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, a coalition of library, non-profit leadership, and education organizations (including the Consortium of State School Boards Associations) addressed the value of technology in schools and the importance of continuing federal support for education technology and connectivity. The coalition contends that “It is essential to distinguish between largely unsupervised, entertainment-driven technology use at home and the intentional, monitored, and carefully curated use of technology in schools — where digital tools are employed to support learning and prepare students for future academic and workforce demands.” The letter goes on to say, “Classroom use of digital tools, aligned to curriculum, guided by educators, and governed by locally developed school district privacy and security policies and related state and federal

laws, is fundamentally different from a student’s unsupervised or entertainment-based device use.” The coalition suggests that rather than efforts to broadly prohibit access to education technology, schools and parents should focus on equipping students with the skills to use technology responsibly and safely.

When implemented with fidelity, a literature review indicates that classroom technology benefits include:

- ✓ Digital literacy and technological skill development
- ✓ Student engagement in active learning
- ✓ Differentiated instruction opportunities for students
- ✓ Self-directed, accelerated learning for gifted students
- ✓ Special needs and ELL students (e.g., text-to-speech and speech-to-text applications)
- ✓ Postsecondary education and workforce preparation

WHAT DO SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS SAY?

Amy Korus, Superintendent, Whitko Community Schools, told InkFree Press that in her school district, “We recognize that technology is an essential tool for preparing students for college, careers, and daily life, but we also understand that it is not the most effective tool for every learning situation. Our expectation is that technology should be used when it enhances instruction, not simply for the sake of using it. Ultimately, our stance is not to move away from technology entirely, but to ensure it is used intentionally, responsibly, and in ways that support student learning and well-being” (5/26/2026: <https://www.inkfreenews.com/2026/05/26/local-school-officials-share-concerns-benefits-of-technology-in-the-classroom/>).

After news broke of Representative Teshka’s request for a study, I asked the ISBA Board of Directors to gather input from their administrators and board colleagues on how 1:1 devices are used in classrooms and on the advantages and drawbacks of these initiatives. Many insightful comments were received, including:

- ▶ “Eliminating devices completely would create tremendous expense in the replacement of (digital) textbooks and materials widely used in schools... While continuing to use devices... it may require more extensive policy (development) and training in its use and application. Specific learning objectives would benefit expectations and implementation of technology as we move forward” per Deb Miller, Huntington County Community School Corporation school board member.

- ▶ “Artificial Intelligence (AI) is advancing rapidly and affecting nearly every profession. From what I learned at the COSSBA national conference in March, K-12 students need meaningful exposure to AI literacy and ethics now. If we get this wrong, the long-term impact on students’ futures could be far greater than the question of 1:1 devices alone” per Ryan Wall, ISBA Region 3 Director, and Huntington County Community School Corporation school board member.
- ▶ Lynn Brown, HCCS Secondary Professional Development Coordinator, commented, “Our elementary students take IREAD-3 and ILEARN assessments on a computer, and therefore need familiarity and comfort using the device to earn the best possible score. Reading a test on a screen is different from paper, and it is a skill that must be developed.”
- ▶ “The financial impact alone would be significant for school corporations. Moving away from technology would disrupt adoption cycles and create significant issues with the extensive use of digital curriculum. We currently rely on a wide range of eTextbook agreements and online (software) program subscriptions across math, science, English, and social studies — many of which are locked into multi-year contracts.

Walking away from those would be costly and impractical” per Brian Woods, Director of Operations, Charles A. Beard Memorial School Corporation.

- ▶ “I think the key at the high school level is finding the right balance. Technology should be used when it enhances learning, such as for research, collaboration, and developing digital skills but it shouldn’t replace meaningful, hands-on learning experiences. Incorporating both digital and traditional approaches can help students build a well-rounded skill set” per Danielle Carmichael, Principal, Knightstown H.S., Charles A. Beard Memorial School Corporation.
- ▶ “(A device ban) would move us further away from the reality our students are walking into. The world is not becoming less digital. It is becoming more dependent on it. Workplace readiness today is tied directly to comfort and skill with technology. A full step back from a 1:1 initiative would risk widening the gap rather than closing it” Jediah Behny, superintendent, Charles A. Beard Memorial School Corporation.
- ▶ “Franklin Township’s 1:1 device initiative is not simply a technology program — it is a foundational instructional model that support student learning, equitable access, and accountability readiness. Any legislative action regarding student device use must be crafted with input from educators, administrators, families, and disability advocates to ensure that guardrails protect student well-being without dismantling the instructional systems that students and teachers depend on every day. FTCSC teachers leverage technology to personalize the learning experience, assign standards-aligned practice, and monitor student progress in real time” per Franklin Township Community School Corporation’s Office of Teaching and Learning.

On May 15, the Fayette County School Corporation issued a press release and informed stakeholders regarding decisions it has made to shift how technology will be utilized in elementary classrooms beginning with the upcoming 2026-27 school year. The changes are based on the belief of the “power of relationships, hands-on learning, meaningful connection, and the impact a teacher can have in the classroom.” The plan calls for ending the issuance of a 1:1 school sanctioned device to Kindergarten and Grade 1 students. The district also indicates it is actively exploring screen time guidelines and best practices for other elementary



“Children only get one childhood. We want our youngest learners spending more time talking, creating, exploring, building relationships, and learning directly from caring adults.”

– Jeremy Duncan, Superintendent, Fayette County School Corporation

grade levels to ensure technology use remains balanced, purposeful, and developmentally appropriate. Jeremy Duncan, superintendent of the district, states his support for this change by saying, “Children only get one childhood. We want our youngest learners spending more time talking, creating, exploring, building relationships, and learning directly from caring adults.” The press release concludes by stating that “Fayette County School Corporation appreciates the partnership of our families, teachers, and community as we continue working together to create learning environments that put students first.”

CONCLUSION

It is important for policymakers, when considering potential legislation to impose screen time restrictions or guardrails, to distinguish between personal devices and school-issued instructional devices. Parents must partner with schools to ensure safe, secure, and optimal use of school-sanctioned devices in the classroom and at home. School officials must assess current practices and ensure that educational technology is focused on student learning needs, guided by teachers, and built with evidence-based practices that prioritize active learning while preparing students for the digital age. It is important to continue to empower schools and districts to set acceptable use policies aligned to their instructional models and student populations.

To achieve these objectives, ISBA offers the following recommendations:

- ▶ **Creation of a blue-ribbon commission of school leaders and teachers to work with the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to develop and issue guidelines on screen time limits and best practices of technology use by grade level.**
- ▶ **Initiation of an IDOE and the State Department of Health public service campaign to inform parents of appropriate and acceptable use guidelines and to share warnings of the harms of overuse of technology and screen time.** This campaign should address the U.S. Surgeon General’s recommendations to model healthy behaviors and create family media use plans for family members to be present

in the moment with one another and use screen-free time to connect with children without distraction.

- ▶ **Expansion of 2026 IDOE legislation (House Enrolled Act 1408) to restrict social media use by children** by further addressing social media companies’ insufficient efforts to control and regulate content for minors. While beyond this recommendation, the American Federation of Teachers has gone so far to call on a “tech tax on Big Tech’s earnings” and on some business operations to ensure they pay their fair share for the adverse and disruptive consequences of this technology to American families, such as workers being displaced by AI.
- ▶ **State and local support with funding for educator training** in the optimal and effective integration of technology in the classroom while supporting digital citizenship.
- ▶ **Finally, district administrators and teachers should continue to assess the use and practice of technology in the classroom** to ensure its effective use as one of many tools to support teaching and learning. 🌟

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Any input received will be presented to the Legislative Committee for review when it meets.



BUILDING ALIGNMENT BEFORE THE ASK

*By Steve Horton, ISBA Director of Board Services and
Derek Morgan, ISBA Assistant Director of Board Services*



Steve Horton



Derek Morgan

As Indiana school corporations navigate the financial challenges posed by SEA 1, more boards are considering whether a referendum may be necessary. Benjamin Franklin once observed, “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” That reminder feels especially relevant as boards consider future funding needs because the preparation for the strongest referendum efforts often begins long before a community is ever asked to vote.

When boards discuss the possibility of a referendum, conversations often focus on tax impacts, facility needs, operational costs, and long-term financial projections. However, the voting public that ultimately decides the fate of a referendum rarely makes that decision based solely on spreadsheets and numbers.

Communities invest in their schools when they understand the important role those schools play in student success and the broader

community. When stakeholders have a clear understanding of where the district is headed, what students need, the priorities driving decision-making, and the outcomes schools are working to achieve, they are more likely to support continued investment in that work.

Building that level of understanding starts long before election season. The foundation for successful community conversations is often built through consistent and strategic leadership over time.

A MORE STRATEGIC APPROACH TO GOVERNANCE

One of the most important distinctions a board can make is understanding the difference between simply governing and governing strategically. While all school boards fulfill important governance responsibilities, boards that intentionally approach their work through a strategic lens often create stronger alignment within the corporation and a clearer story for their communities.

Basic board governance work includes approving budgets, conducting effective meetings, and establishing clear, up-to-date policies.

Strategic boards establish long-term priorities, align decisions with those priorities, hold themselves and the administration accountable, maintain a focus on student outcomes, and intentionally create a shared understanding of where the district is headed.

“YOU ONLY WANT TO HEAR FROM US WHEN YOU NEED MONEY”

A common complaint that leads to failed referendums is, “The school district is only interested in what we have to say when they need money.” That’s fair. Often, it is a true statement. School boards can become frustrated by overwhelming negativity on social media, and, unfortunately, it can distract from the work and decision-making.

Boards should consider that negative feedback from the community, in many cases, is a reaction to a lack of authentic engagement. By that, we mean engagement which lacks a willingness to listen openly and consider honest feedback. If people feel their voices are being heard, they are much more likely to support and even champion the school corporation’s needs.

Community engagement is most effective when it is not a one-off endeavor. The difficulty of the work is accepting that it is never complete. Your community is ever-changing, and the challenges you face continually evolve. It is a moving target, but that is the nature of the work.

We don’t need to point out that there is a significant political movement against additional taxes, yet the expense of operating a school corporation is continually climbing. So, how does this connect to the strategic work boards and administrations do together?

Perhaps the crucial point here is that the things we do in the moment because of an urgent need are rarely as effective as they should be. The process of developing a plan requires intentional thought and valuable learning. A plan allows you to maintain focus on the most important aspects of your work. The work becomes more intentional, and communication becomes more focused. The plan allows the board to be more engaged with the end results and maintain a clearer big-picture view. It allows the questions to be more focused on the initiatives that will drive better outcomes, and less about individual needs and concerns.

When boards and superintendents can clearly demonstrate how priorities, decisions, and resources connect to improved student outcomes, referendum conversations become less about asking for more money and more about sustaining meaningful progress.

CONNECTING THE PIECES

School corporations across Indiana achieve greatness every school year through the amazing efforts of teachers, staff, administrators, and board members. We have truly remarkable individuals who show up every day dedicated to ensuring young people receive a quality education. When you hire good people, good things will happen. When you connect all the good people and the work they do, great things can happen.

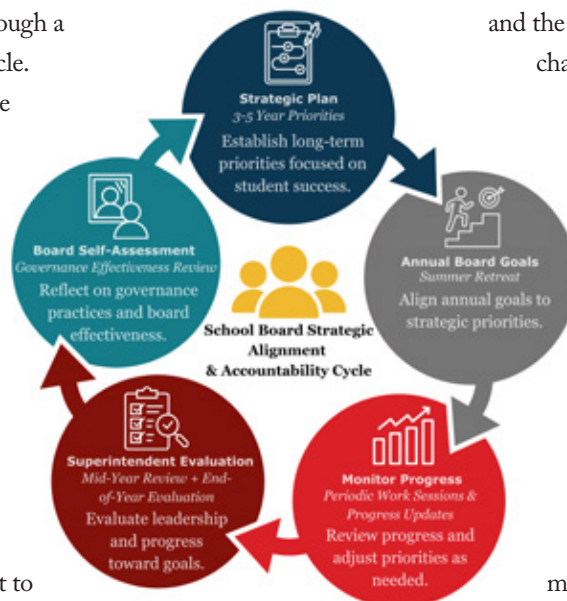
Many school corporations already have pieces of strategic governance in place. They have a mission statement proudly displayed on their website. They set annual and long-term goals that support important initiatives. They complete annual superintendent evaluations. They may even make decisions rooted in data. The challenge boards often face is connecting them in ways that ensure they lead with purpose.

When these pieces operate independently, it can become difficult for those invested in the corporation’s success to maintain a shared understanding of where it is headed. Goals and initiatives may begin competing with one another. Board work can become reactionary instead of intentional. Progress becomes difficult to measure and even more difficult to communicate to the community.

When boards intentionally align their work, telling that

narrative becomes easier. The corporation's vision and priorities become easier to articulate and connect to the work happening every day in classrooms, schools, and across the district. Rather than viewing strategic planning, goal setting, progress monitoring, superintendent evaluations, and board reflection as separate activities, strategic boards recognize that each piece should build upon and reinforce the others.

One way to approach this work is through a strategic alignment and accountability cycle. While boards may engage in each of these activities individually, their true power is realized when each piece supports the next. Goals guide priorities and monitoring. Monitoring strengthens accountability. Reflection creates opportunities for improvement. The cycle continually reinforces itself and keeps the board focused on long-term outcomes. Alignment not only strengthens internal decision-making but also helps communities better understand how district priorities connect to student success.



STARTING THE WORK

The first step is to start the conversation. Begin the dialogue by bringing the leadership team together and securing everyone's commitment. Set parameters for expectations and realize that it is not possible to accomplish everything on the "need" list. Focus on two or three priorities. Identify where you are growing and where there are needs. Set the stage for monitoring outcomes, in a process of continuous improvement that, over time, should yield impactful benefits.

An important part of all of this is establishing a calendar and consistent points of contact for the goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes. The process of establishing, monitoring, and evaluating as an intentional effort throughout the year makes a difference.

COMMUNITY TRUST STARTS IN THE BOARDROOM

One point we wish more boards would take to heart is the importance of the work they do together and the direct correlation with community trust. The internal struggles, personal feuds, and at times, chaos we see among boards do irreparable damage to the trust school boards need to govern effectively. Our school

corporations need their communities, and the communities need their local school corporations. That need goes beyond operating funds and property values. It goes directly to identity, quality of life, and the most important commodity, our children.

When the board focuses on its strategic plan and goals, and continually seeks to align decisions with that plan, it can change the dynamics of personal relationships among the board and the superintendent. The purpose is to solve challenges together, not battle each other over differing ideas. It is those battles that erode public opinion of the board and, by extension, the entire corporation. The public appearance of disunity is more detrimental to the corporation than many boards are willing to accept. That does not mean everyone must agree and disregard individual insights and opinions, but it does require individuals to work in concert with one another and handle differences as part of the decision-making process. That is where focusing on strategic goals and the strategies to achieve them makes a difference.

The community needs to see an organization with purpose and real, measurable growth. The story you can tell through the implementation of a defined strategic plan will inspire confidence and set the corporation up for long-term success.

IT'S THE CYCLICAL WORK THAT WINS REFERENDUMS

Perhaps it is best expressed in a quote from DuFour, Eaker, and Ranells 1994 article, *School Improvement and the Art of Visioning*. "We must realize that one profitable crop will not be grounds for retirement. We must continually plan, monitor, and model the best behaviors and practices known. This will only happen if the process is cyclical, if it becomes internalized, if it is how we do business every day."

Therefore, the work is setting the culture of your leadership team. When your pursuit of growth and continuous improvement is embedded in your work throughout the year, you are working to achieve effective governance and set yourself up for success for the referendum on the ballot. Remember, as you are approaching this work, ISBA is here to assist you. 🌟



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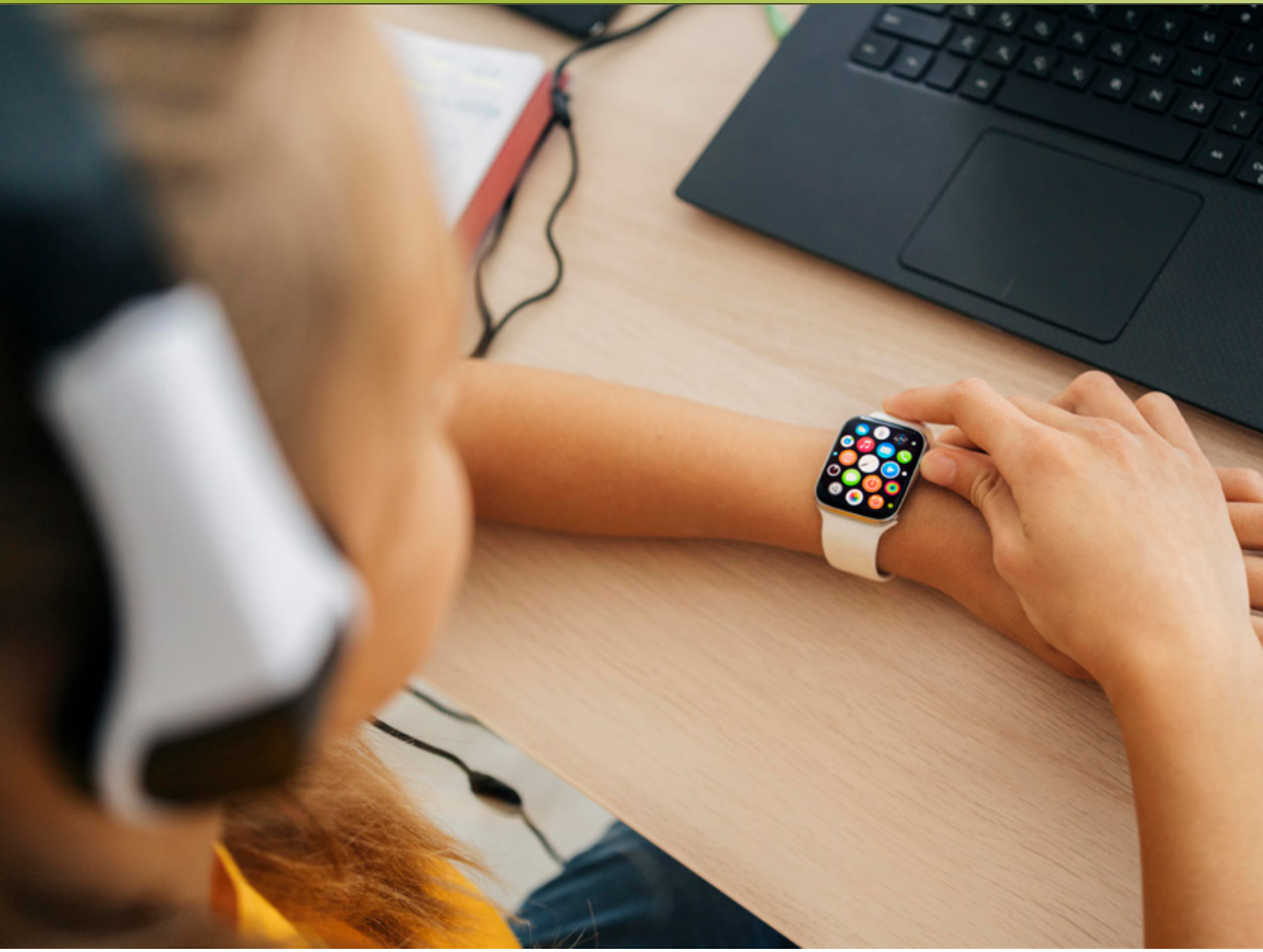
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INDIANA SCHOOLS NAVIGATE **WIRELESS COMMUNICATION DEVICES** IN AN ERA OF AI ADVANCEMENT

By Bre'Anna Donaldson, Esq., ISBA Staff Attorney

Indiana school boards are entering another era of student technology regulation. Senate Enrolled Act 78 (“SEA 78”), effective July 1, 2026, will significantly expand Indiana’s existing wireless communication device law. The expansion requires every school corporation to adopt and implement a policy governing student use and possession of wireless communication devices during the school day.

While much of the public discussion surrounding the legislation has focused on cellular phones, the amended statute reaches far beyond traditional cell phone use. The law now addresses a broad range of wireless communication devices, including tablets, laptops, gaming devices, and certain smartwatches. As technology continues to evolve, school boards and administrators may also find themselves addressing newer forms of wearable technology, including artificial intelligence-enabled smart glasses and other internet-connected devices that were not widely used in schools even a few years ago.

For school boards, the implementation of SEA 78 presents both policy and operational considerations. The law requires boards to adopt a policy, but it also leaves school administrators with discretion regarding enforcement procedures, storage methods, discipline practices, and how to address emerging technologies that may not be specifically named in the statute.

This article provides an overview of SEA 78, discusses practical implementation concerns, and highlights emerging issues related to AI-enabled wearable technology, including Meta smart glasses and similar devices.

THE EXPANSION OF WIRELESS COMMUNICATION DEVICE POLICIES

SEA 78 amended Indiana Code 20-26-5-40.7 and broadened the scope of school wireless communication device policies. Under the amended law, school corporations must adopt and implement a wireless communication device policy that applies throughout the “school day.” A student’s “school day” is defined as the entirety of the time a student is present on school property for a student instructional day. SEA 78 further references Indiana Code 20-30-2-2, which defines a “student instructional day” generally as at least five (5) instructional hours for grades 1 through 6 and at least six (6) instructional hours for grades 7 through 12, subject to certain statutory exceptions for flex programs, qualified high schools, and dual credit enrollment. Because the statute applies during the entirety of the time a student is present on school property during the instructional day, school corporations should interpret

the law to extend beyond traditional classroom instruction and into hallways, passing periods, cafeterias, media centers, study halls, and other portions of the school day occurring on school property.

Importantly, the law shifted the focus away from restricting devices during “instructional time” and instead requires regulation throughout the entire school day. The statute now requires schools to adopt one of two approaches:

1. A “no device” policy under which students are prohibited from bringing wireless communication devices to school; or
2. A storage policy under which devices may be brought to school but must remain powered off, stored away, and inaccessible to students throughout the school day.

The law also limits when wireless communication devices may be used for instructional purposes. Before July 1, 2028, teachers directed instructional use may occur either on a school supplied wireless communication device or, if the school does not provide devices, on a school sanctioned wireless communication device. However, after June 30, 2028, instructional use may occur only on school supplied devices.

SEA 78 also expanded the statutory definition of “wireless communication device” as:

- ▶ cellular telephones,
- ▶ tablet computers,
- ▶ laptop computers,
- ▶ gaming devices, and
- ▶ smartwatches connected to a cellular telephone, cell tower, or the internet.

While the law specifically identifies these devices, boards may want to consider whether their local policy language is broad enough to address future technologies and emerging wearable devices capable of phone calls, messaging, livestreaming, or accessing artificial intelligence platforms.

LOOKING BEYOND PHONES: EMERGING WEARABLE TECHNOLOGY IN SCHOOLS

Many school wireless device policies historically focused on student cell phone use. However, today’s technology landscape includes devices that may function similarly to phones while appearing substantially different in form. As school officials review and implement policies under SEA 78, they may want to consider

whether their existing policy language is broad enough to address evolving wearable communication technology.

One example receiving growing national attention is Meta AI-enabled smart glasses, including the Ray-Ban Meta product line. These devices may contain cameras, microphones, speakers, internet connectivity, Bluetooth capabilities, voice assistant functions, and artificial intelligence integration while resembling ordinary prescription or non-prescription eyewear. In addition, emerging smart glasses and other AI-enabled wearable eyewear may allow students to view calls, messages, notifications and respond through voice commands. Other developing wearable communication technologies include smart rings, such as the ORII, which may alert a student to incoming calls or messages and allow the student to respond directly through the ring. Schools may also encounter internet-connected earbuds, recording-enabled accessories, and future wearable communication devices not yet commonly used in educational settings.

While implementing SEA 78, these devices may raise several practical questions for school corporations:

- Does the Corporation's policy definition cover smart glasses?
- Are wearable recording devices addressed separately?
- How will staff identify prohibited use?
- Should AI-enabled glasses be treated similarly to smartwatches or phones?
- How should schools handle devices capable of livestreaming or recording?

Although SEA 78 does not specifically identify wearable technology by name, Indiana law broadly defines a wireless communication device as a portable wireless device capable of providing voice, messaging, or other data communication between two or more parties. Most wearable devices communicate through Bluetooth connectivity, Wi-Fi access, internet syncing, mobile applications, or artificial intelligence integration. As such, these devices may fall within the broad definition of a wireless communication device under statute and may already be covered by a school corporation's wireless communication device policy. Therefore, student possession or use of smart glasses, smart rings, internet-connected earbuds, or similar wearable communication technology during the school day will constitute a violation of the school corporation's policy to the same extent as unauthorized cell phone use.

PREScription SMART GLASSES AND REASONABLE TRANSITION CONSIDERATIONS

An additional consideration involves students who wear prescription smart glasses as part of their daily eyewear. Many prescription smart glasses and AI-enabled wearable eyewear contain Bluetooth capabilities, internet access, recording functions, messaging features, or artificial intelligence integration. These devices fall within the scope of a school corporation's wireless communication device policy if the corporation's policy language aligns with the broad requirements and definitions established under SEA 78. As a result, students' use of prescription smart glasses during the school day is a violation of the corporation's wireless communication device policy.

In practice, school corporations may consider implementing procedures addressing how prescription smart glasses will be handled during the school day. For example, schools may require students to disable wireless, Bluetooth, internet, recording, or



25
YEARS

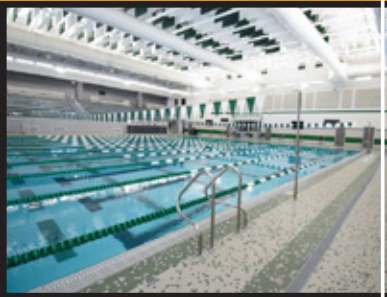
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artificial intelligence functions during the school day until the student is able to obtain prescription glasses without wireless communication or artificial intelligence capabilities in a reasonable amount of time.

School corporations may also consider adding language to their wireless communication device policy expressly prohibiting prescription smart glasses or other AI-enabled wearable eyewear during the school day.

As wearable technology continues to evolve within prescription products, school corporations may provide students and parents with reasonable notice and a reasonable transition period to obtain traditional prescription eyewear when necessary for compliance with local policy requirements.

MANDATORY EXCEPTIONS UNDER SEA 78

While SEA 78 broadly restricts wireless communication devices during the school day, the law also contains mandatory exceptions. Schools may not prohibit device use when the use is included in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP); included in a Section 504 Plan; necessary to manage a documented medical condition with provider authorization; authorized during an emergency by the superintendent or designee; or necessary for language translation for multilingual learners.

The law also permits the use of certain unobtrusive audio recording devices used solely for educational notetaking or personal learning assistance if specific statutory requirements are met. Boards should ensure that policy language accurately reflects these required exceptions and that administrators understand how such exceptions should be implemented. School corporations may allow a reasonable period of time for IEPs, Section 504 Plans, medical documentation, and other student accommodation plans to be reviewed and updated, when necessary, to address compliance with the newly adopted wireless communication device policy.

CIVIL IMMUNITY AND GOOD FAITH COMPLIANCE

SEA 78 provides immunity from civil liability for school corporations and school personnel for actions taken in good faith to comply with the wireless communication device law, except in cases involving gross negligence or intentional misconduct.

While this immunity provision may provide reassurance to boards and administrators implementing new policies, corporations should still ensure policies are clearly written, procedures are consistently followed, staff are appropriately trained, and communication with students and families occurs before implementation.

SEA 78 represents more than a traditional cell phone restriction law. The legislation creates a broader framework for

how Indiana schools regulate wireless communication devices during the school day.

As technology continues evolving, school boards may increasingly encounter devices that combine communication, artificial intelligence, recording, and internet connectivity into wearable products that are smaller, less visible, and more difficult to regulate than traditional phones.

For school boards, the most effective policies will likely be those that remain flexible enough to address future technology developments while also balancing statutory requirements, operational realities, and reasonable accommodations for students and families. 🎓



THANK YOU FOR MAKING A DIFFERENCE!

As the school year concludes, we celebrate your commitment to students and communities. Thank you for letting us walk alongside you—every step of the way.



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Policy Advisor

By Julie M. Slavens, Esq., ISBA Senior Counsel/Director of Policy Services

EDUCATION DEREGULATION: PART II

House Enrolled Act 1004 passed by the 2026 Indiana General Assembly and effective July 1, 2026, is the second major legislation amending Title 20, which is the education code in Indiana law. The Act has been referred to as the “education deregulation” bill, as it repealed many statutes in Title 20 that contained “may” provisions. These are statutes containing permissive actions and not mandates. Such provisions are not necessary, as school boards have the authority to engage in these actions if not prohibited or addressed in law per the Home Rule statute (see IC 20-26-3). In HEA 1004, many “may” provisions were repealed, some required provisions were repealed, some provisions were recodified and grouped together to remove previously repealed statutes in various code chapters, and some language was added.

This article will not address all the repealed, recodified, and amended provisions contained in HEA 1004 but will highlight those provisions relevant to school boards or that school boards should be aware of in governing school corporations. These items will be addressed in groups as board related, student related, and employee related. Some of the student-related provisions directly affect board policy and will be noted when discussed.

BOARD-RELATED PROVISIONS

Three sections of HEA 1004 directly affect school boards. Two of the sections add required actions for school boards and one provides more flexibility for school boards.

► **Section 48:** This section amends IC 20-26-4-3 by adding a requirement when a school board meets with one or more other school boards. The requirement states the joint meeting must take place within one of the school corporation’s boundaries. Inclusion of this language clarifies joint meetings of school boards cannot take place outside of any school corporations’ boundaries, just as most meetings of a school board must take place within the school corporation boundaries.

► **Section 113:** This section amends IC 20-30-5-11 with respect to when a school board must provide instruction on the effects on the human body of alcohol, tobacco and nicotine products, prescription drugs, and controlled substances. Formerly this instruction had to be offered in kindergarten through grade 12. The new requirements for such instruction are to be offered at least two times in kindergarten through grade 8 and one time in grades 9 through 12. This section also repealed the requirement for

Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to provide assistance in training teachers in drug education.

► **Section 120:** This requires every school to **conspicuously** post on the school's website the link to the school's web page on the Internet dashboard maintained by the IDOE. The new language implies the link to the dashboard will need to be easily found on a school's website, such as on the main web page, or an obvious link to where it can be found.

STUDENT-RELATED PROVISIONS

The following sections of HEA 1004 address student matters:

► **Section 61:** This section amends the acceptable use policy law (IC 20-26-5-40.5). The amendment requires a school corporation to adopt a policy enabling a parent to increase the strength of the filter used by the school to block Internet materials harmful to minors, to block access to websites or content harmful to minors, and to limit the amount of time a student may use the device when the student is not in school or engaging in online instruction or remote learning. This policy must be shared with all parents in the school corporation, in addition to being posted on the school corporation's website. A school has until January 1, 2027, to adopt and implement the policy.

Acceptable use policies as required by state and federal law already must address content filters. The additional requirements enacted under Section 61 could be incorporated into an existing acceptable use policy or be adopted as a new separate policy. ISBA has distributed to members a revised acceptable use policy containing the newly required language. A school board has the option to leave the provision on parental filters in the ISBA acceptable use policy or remove the provision on parent filters and make it a separate policy.

► **Section 80 and Section 137:** These sections address the same subject. Section 80 repeals the State Board of Education (SBOE) authority to hear appeals on student expulsions due to legal settlement (IC 20-26-11-15). Section 137 repeals the law allowing a school to expel a student from school due to lack of legal settlement (IC 20-33-8-17). The latter statute was a "may"

provision, so a school corporation continues to have the authority to expel on the basis of legal settlement (this would require a notice in the student discipline rules); the student or parent would no longer be able to appeal the decision to the SBOE.



► **Section 129:** This section amends IC 30-33-2-15 to add all the exemptions to the compulsory attendance law in one section rather than each individual exemption in its own section. Some of the exemptions were also amended. The exemption related to the State Fair now only applies to the student who is exhibiting at the State Fair and does not extend to siblings of students exhibiting at the State Fair. In addition, for a non-classroom related activity, the

school must give notice to the parent of the student a description of the activity and the date and time of the activity. This notice must be given to the parent at least one full school day prior to the activity.

Other new requirements per the amendments to this statute include a student must be in good academic standing in order for the student to be exempted for participation in the civil air patrol, the air cadet exchange program, and an emergency service operation of the air patrol, exhibiting at the State Fair, and participating in a FFA or 4-H club event, competition, or exhibition. The amendments also require the school attendance officer or principal or designee to request documentation to verify the student's participation in the exempted activity.

The amendments in this section require changes to the required board policy on absences. ISBA has distributed its amended absences policy to its members.

► **Section 136:** This section amends the law on possession of a firearm, destructive device, and deadly weapon by a student on school property (IC 20-33-8-16). The amendment adds the principal may reduce the mandated expulsion period of one year for a student who possesses a firearm or destructive device. Previously only the superintendent had the authority to do so. This allows the principal to determine the length of the expulsion appropriate for the statutory violation rather than the additional step of the superintendent doing so. A school board may determine if the principal may do so or continue having the

superintendent do so. This section also removes the permissive duty of the superintendent to report to law enforcement the possession of a deadly weapon by a student.

These amendments may require a change in your student discipline rules and/or procedures. ISBA has distributed its student discipline rules and procedures to reflect these changes.

On a related note, Section 57 of the Act repealed the provision requiring IDOE to produce a list of best practices to reduce student discipline issues and post it on its website.

EMPLOYEE-RELATED PROVISIONS

The following sections of HEA 1004 address employee matters:

► **Section 94:** This section amends IC 20-28-5-8 removing the subsection requiring the superintendent to immediately notify the secretary of education when a current or former licensed teacher is convicted of a crime or when the school board takes final action against an employee when the employee has engaged in criminal conduct. This provision was redundant as the law already required the prosecuting attorney to report the conviction of a licensed teacher. Even though no longer required to do so, a superintendent could still give this notice of such conviction or any final action taken by the school board against a teacher for criminal behavior.

► **Section 96:** This section removes the requirement for school boards to report to IDOE information on adjunct teachers hired by the school board. The reporting requirements included the number of adjunct teacher permits issued and adjunct teachers hired by the school board at each grade level and subject matter, the names of all adjunct teachers at each grade level and the subject area taught, their experience level, their salary and other compensation, and the number of previous employment agreements entered into with adjunct teachers. This reporting removal relieves administrators from gathering this detailed information and reporting to IDOE, which is not legally responsible for adjunct teachers.

► **Section 99:** This section amends the temporary teacher contract law (IC 20-28-6-6) to add teachers with an emergency permit to the list of the uses of a temporary teacher's contract.

While this is an addition to the law, it is a helpful one, as teachers with emergency permits could only be placed on regular teacher's contracts, which would require a school corporation to go through the regular teacher's contract cancellation process to remove the teacher from employment. A temporary teacher's contract term by law is for at most a school year and ends at the end of the stated term; thus, not requiring due process to end the contract.

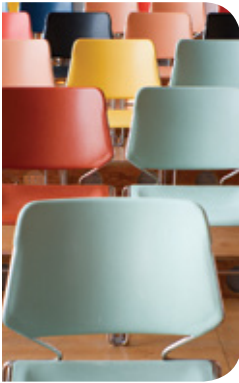
► **Section 102:** This section repealed IC 20-28-7.5-8, which required a teacher to give 30 days' notice when the teacher was under contract with a school corporation and was going to work for and sign a contract with another Indiana public school. The former law allowed the principal of the first school to release the teacher from the contract. It also allowed a principal to keep a teacher for 30 days if the teacher had not given notice in order to give the principal time to find another teacher. With the repeal of this law, the principal no longer has the 30-day leverage when a teacher leaves for another school during the school year or within 14 days of the beginning of the school year.

► **Section 103:** This section amended the principal and assistant principal contract statute (IC 20-28-8-2) to allow the school board and the administrator upon mutual agreement to enter into an alternative employment contract other than the regular teacher's contract. This is an option and the school board can continue to require and use the regular teacher's contract. The law on non-renewing a principal or an assistant principal was not changed.

► **Section 104:** This section removed the requirement to use a regular teacher's contract to employ a director of special education (IC 20-28-8-10). The removal of this requirement gives a school corporation the option to continue to use the regular teacher's contract or another form of employment contract. The statute still requires an employment contract to be used when hiring a special education director. In addition, the law on non-renewal of a special education director was not changed. 📌

If you have any questions about information in this publication please contact Julie M. Slavens by phone at: 317-639-4362 or by e-mail at jslavens@isba-ind.org.





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A SCORECARD OF INDIANA SCHOOL PROPERTY TAX REFERENDUMS

(2008-2025)



By Adam VanOsdol, ISBA Communications Specialist/Content Strategist

A record number of school corporations have placed referendums on the November 2026 general election ballot seeking voter approval to raise additional property tax revenue to fund basic school operations. The single biggest factor in the surge is Senate Enrolled Act 1 (SEA 1), passed in 2025, which increased homestead deductions and other tax breaks, resulting in fewer property tax dollars flowing to public schools. SEA 1 also limits when referendums can appear on the ballot. Indiana now requires school referendums to be held only during November general elections in even-numbered years, meaning districts have only one ballot opportunity every two years. The following scorecard examines school referendum outcomes in Indiana since the enactment of property tax caps in 2008.

INDIANA SCHOOL REFERENDUMS BY THE NUMBERS

FROM 2008-2025



294

TOTAL Property Tax
Referendums Proposed

188

TOTAL Property Tax
Referendums Approved
(64% pass rate)



194

Operating Referendums
Proposed

135

Operating
Referendums Passed
(70% pass rate)



96

Construction Referendums
Proposed

51

Construction
Referendums Passed
(53% pass rate)



4

School Safety
Referendums Proposed

2

School Safety
Referendums Passed
(50% pass rate)

OVERALL ACTIVITY

From 2008–2025, voters decided 294 school property tax referendums in Indiana:

- 194 operating referendums
- 96 construction referendums
- 4 school safety referendums

Of these, 188 were approved, for an overall pass rate of 64%:

- 135 operating referendums (70% pass rate)
- 51 construction referendums (53%)
- 2 school safety referendums (50%)

RECENT TRENDS

Approval rates peaked between 2016 and 2020 but have come down since. The referendum pass rate for the most recent five years (2021 through 2025) is 15 percentage points lower than during the peak years. More than 80% of school referendums passed in four out of five years from 2016–2020, but the pass rate has been under 70% in every year since then.

- (2016–2020): 82 out of 105 passed (78%)
- (2021–2025): 39 out of 62 passed (63%)

RENEWALS VS. NEW REFERENDUMS

The lower pass rates in recent years reflect divergent outcomes between new requests and renewals. While referendum renewals sit on relatively firm ground, requests for new referendums face an uphill battle. Since November 2022, 86% of school referendum renewals in Indiana have passed, suggesting that when the fiscal ask is framed as preserving existing services, voter friction is low.

In contrast, only one out of the past 11 new requests has prevailed.

- Renewals: 24 out of 28 passed (86%)
- New referendums: 1 of 11 (9%)

MOST IN A SINGLE ELECTION

The most school corporations with a referendum in a single election was 18, occurring in the 2010 general election. The most school corporations that won a referendum in a single election was 12 in the 2020 primary election.

SCHOOL CORPORATION PARTICIPATION

Just under half of school corporations have tried a referendum, but less than one-third have been successful.

- 144 school corporations (49.7%) have attempted a referendum
- 88 corporations (30%) have passed at least one referendum
- 70 corporations (24%) have passed an operating referendum

Breakdown of operating referendum success:

- 1 school corporation has passed 4 operating referendums
- 20 have passed 3
- 22 passed 2
- 27 passed 1

Of the 135 successful operating referendums, the average approved tax rate was 27 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation.

REFERENDUM PASS RATES:

2016–2020

78%

PASSED

2021–2025

63%

PASSED

144

School corporations have **ATTEMPTED** a referendum

88

School corporations have **PASSED** at least one referendum

86%

Renewal referendums **PASSED** since November 2022 (24 of out 28)

18

Most school corporations with a referendum in a single election (November 2010)

27¢

Average approved tax rate per \$100 of assessed valuation

KEY TAKEAWAY

While referendums have become a common tool for school funding in Indiana, recent election results suggest growing voter resistance to new operating referendums, even as renewals continue to pass at very high rates. 🗳️

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark grey blazer over a white top and a blue lanyard with an ID badge, is smiling and speaking into a black handheld microphone. She is standing in a modern, brightly lit room with large windows in the background. Other people are partially visible in the background, including a man in a brown jacket and a woman in a grey top.

TELLING YOUR SCHOOL'S STORY

Amid Uncertain Times

By Thom Fladung, Hennes Communications-AKCG



One of the few certainties that school boards and school corporations can count on these days is uncertainty.

Issues confronting school leaders arrive at a relentless pace. Funding debates. Moving budget targets. Property tax changes. Universal eligibility for the Choice Scholarship

program and what that may mean. Student technology policies – especially artificial intelligence. Accountability measures. Federal directives. Court rulings. Legislative proposals. Social media controversies.

The issues vary but the communications challenge is the same. How can school board members and school administrators prepare for an array of issues and speak truthfully, transparently and consistently when the inevitable question is posed: What do you think about this and what are you doing about it?

How should school leaders respond? What should they be doing now to prepare?

From a crisis communications and crisis planning perspective, here are several best practices to consider.

SEPARATE HEADLINES FROM OPERATIONAL REALITY

In today's environment, breaking news travels faster than ever. A legislative proposal can generate headlines before anyone knows if it has a chance of becoming law. A court decision can be interpreted dozens of different ways before legal experts have fully analyzed it. And see if this one sounds familiar: a social media post ignites a firestorm before anyone knows the facts.

The temptation is to react immediately.

Resist that temptation.

Instead, go to school on the issue. Try to understand what has actually changed or may change. Evaluate what this means, if anything, to the people your schools care about the most – teachers, staff, parents, students and taxpayers. Not every announcement requires immediate action. Not every controversy affects your school. Not every prediction becomes reality.

Ready, fire, aim is not the course to choose.

School leaders should distinguish among proposed legislation, enacted laws, agency guidance, court rulings and local policy decisions. Understanding those differences can help prevent unnecessary confusion and allow districts to make thoughtful

decisions based on facts rather than speculation.

That doesn't mean waiting passively, or hoping the issue will go away. It almost never does. It means using uncertainty as an opportunity to prepare.

The time between a headline and its practical impact is valuable. Use it to gather information, consult trusted advisors and subject matter experts, review policies and develop communication plans. Preparation is far more effective than reaction.

REVIEW POLICIES AND PROCEDURES BEFORE YOU NEED THEM

Use peacetime wisely. Periods of quiet or uncertainty are the time to review existing policies and procedures.

Many of the issues that generate public discussion eventually raise practical questions for school corporations. How will your schools respond? Who is responsible for weighing in on and making decisions? What procedures are in place? What legal requirements apply?

Now is the time to answer those questions – not in the middle of a controversy.

Work closely with legal counsel and administrative leadership to review policies that could be affected by changes in state or federal law. Ensure that staff members understand their responsibilities and that procedures are clear, consistent and defensible.

The goal is not to predict every future challenge. You can't. The goal is to be prepared when challenges arise.

KEEP COMMUNICATION LINES OPEN

As always, communications follow actions.

First, determine whether and how your district will respond to an issue. Then explain those decisions clearly and consistently.

Your teachers, staff members, parents, students and community members are looking to your schools' leaders for information and reassurance. They want to know that the people running their schools are paying attention, evaluating developments carefully and acting responsibly.

When the situation remains uncertain, say so.

There is nothing wrong with telling people that you are still gathering information, consulting experts or awaiting further

The goal is not to predict every future challenge. You can't. The goal is to be prepared when challenges arise.

guidance. Most people understand that some questions do not have immediate answers.

What they are much less likely to accept is silence.

There may well be legitimate reasons you can't address an issue in detail. Student privacy is paramount. Personnel issues may be in play. But "no comment" and its first cousin "can't be reached

for comment" will be regarded as guilty pleas in the court of public opinion.

And when there is an information vacuum, something will fill it. Rumors spread. Misinformation takes hold. Trust erodes.

People do not expect school leaders to know everything immediately. They do expect them to be engaged, transparent and responsive.

"No comment" and its first cousin "can't be reached for comment" will be regarded as guilty pleas in the court of public opinion.

DON'T LET OTHERS DEFINE YOUR STORY

The strongest reputations are built through consistent communication over time.

Talk regularly about student achievement. Celebrate staff accomplishments. Highlight career and technical education programs. Share stories about academic growth, community partnerships and innovative learning opportunities.

When difficult issues emerge, districts that have built credibility with their communities are in a stronger position to be heard and trusted.

In uncertain times, communication is not a defensive tool. It is a leadership tool.

EQUIP STAFF WITH COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Preparation will help minimize confusion and fear.

Consider providing training that helps staff members communicate confidently during challenging situations.

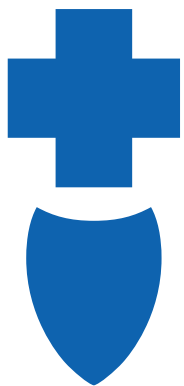
This may include:

- ▶ Workshops focused on handling high-pressure conversations professionally and respectfully
- ▶ Training on responding to difficult questions from parents and community members
- ▶ Guidance on recognizing when questions should be referred to supervisors or designated spokespersons
- ▶ Media training for board presidents, superintendents, principals and others who may interact with reporters

Every interaction matters. A thoughtful response from a front-office staff member can build trust. An inconsistent response can create confusion.

Communication training helps ensure that everyone is working from the same playbook.





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BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR MESSAGES

Effective communication depends on consistency.

Your schools' mission and values should serve as the foundation for every public message.

When discussing controversial or rapidly evolving issues, consider several key principles:

- ▶ Emphasize that the district follows all applicable laws and regulations
- ▶ Focus on facts rather than speculation
- ▶ Keep discussions grounded in local realities rather than national political debates
- ▶ Explain what the district knows, what it is still evaluating and when additional information will be available
- ▶ Ensure that staff members who interact with the public understand key messages and know how to respond appropriately

- ▶ Reinforce the district's commitment to student learning, student well-being and school safety

Most importantly, communicate what you can control.

School leaders cannot control every legislative proposal, court decision or political debate. They can control how they educate students, support staff, serve families and communicate with their communities.

Those are powerful messages.

And in uncertain times, providing clarity, consistency and confidence may be one of the most important services a school district can offer. ★

Thom Fladung is a vice president for Hennes Communications, a division of AKCG Public Relations Counselors. To reach him, email fladung@crisiscommunications.com or call 216-213-5196.

Your schools' mission and values should serve as the foundation for every public message.



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WHEN THE VOTE FALLS SHORT:

HARD LESSONS FROM A NARROW DEFEAT



By Amber Toole, Treasurer, Partners in Excellence PAC



In November 2025, Northwest Allen County Schools (NACS) lost a critical funding referendum by just under 600 votes. As a parent and a member of the referendum's Political Action Committee (PAC), I experienced an eye-opening journey and learned invaluable lessons about communication, community perception, and advocacy.

WHAT WE DID RIGHT

From a transparency standpoint, NACS set a high bar. The district began sharing information nearly 14 months before Election Day. Budgets, graphs, and financial projections were presented openly at school board meetings and carefully documented online. The need was clearly laid out: NACS was underfunded by roughly \$8 million annually compared to peers, and the \$12 million ask aimed to close that gap while addressing future opportunities.

Our PAC aligned with the district on messaging. We launched a dedicated website and Facebook page and executed multiple direct-mail campaigns. Referendum supporters showed up consistently and visibly, handing out flyers at community events, attending football games, and organizing phone and text banks.

Yet, despite our strong ground game on paper, we ran into some deep-seated undercurrents that data alone just couldn't fix.

THE WEIGHT OF OLD CONFLICTS

A vocal group of detractors used the campaign to revisit past grievances over mask mandates and pandemic-era policies. Online conversations became so heated that several local social media pages and community groups had to turn off comments or stop allowing referendum-related posts entirely.

Simultaneously, a well-funded opposition group, Americans for Prosperity, mobilized voters against the referendum, particularly targeting rural areas where the tax increase would carry a heavier felt impact.

These disagreements created an environment so tense that community supporters were effectively silenced. Privately, many business owners and residents told us they backed the referendum, but publicly, fear of social and commercial backlash kept them from displaying signs, making statements, or leveraging their personal networks.

The result was a stark imbalance. Opposition was loud and intimidating, while support, although widespread, remained hidden.

THE MISSING HUMAN CONNECTION

In hindsight, we may have relied too heavily on data and not enough on stories.

We talked at length about Career and Technical Education (CTE), school safety, and staffing needs, but we rarely brought those priorities to life through personal testimonials. We didn't fully capture the voices of the students who would directly benefit from high-paying trade pathways, or the stories of teachers stretched thin across multiple roles.

We also lacked a long-standing alumni network from which to draw volunteers, and we didn't knock on enough doors, partly due to safety concerns for our all-female PAC team. This limited our ability to engage in the kind of face-to-face, living-room conversations that build trust and dismantle misinformation.



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*For more information on ISBA meetings and locations
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THE “CONSEQUENCE GAP”

While we focused heavily on the positive deliverables of a successful referendum, what we didn’t emphasize enough was what would happen if the measure failed. We didn’t explicitly warn voters that class sizes could climb to a minimum of 30 students, that schools may need to establish walk zones, or that our students would fall behind their regional peers when applying to competitive colleges and trade positions.

Voters need to understand the benefits of a “yes,” but they must also deeply feel the tangible, painful realities of a “no.”

PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

Another hurdle was the disconnect between what the community saw on the outside and what the district was experiencing on the inside.

To the casual observer, NACS looked like a thriving, wealthy district. We had beautiful new buildings, expansions, ribbon cuttings, and enrollment growth. This led voters to ask a completely fair question: “If you have the money to build all of this, why can’t you afford to pay teachers more?”

We repeatedly explained how school funding is divided into strict, separate buckets by state law, and how capital project dollars

cannot legally be used to support the salaries of teachers. We shared data demonstrating that our administrative costs were incredibly lean, hovering at about half that of comparable districts.

Furthermore, because our schools were already high-performing academically, many voters felt the status quo was perfectly fine. Ironically, our past success became a barrier to our future funding.

THE COST QUESTION

As a district seeking a new referendum, no issue came up more frequently than taxes.

Despite efforts to clearly communicate the projected impact, skepticism persisted. Some voters believed the messaging was misleading. Others simply felt any increase was unaffordable. And for some, the trust wasn’t fully there.

MOVING FORWARD: FOUR ESSENTIAL LESSONS

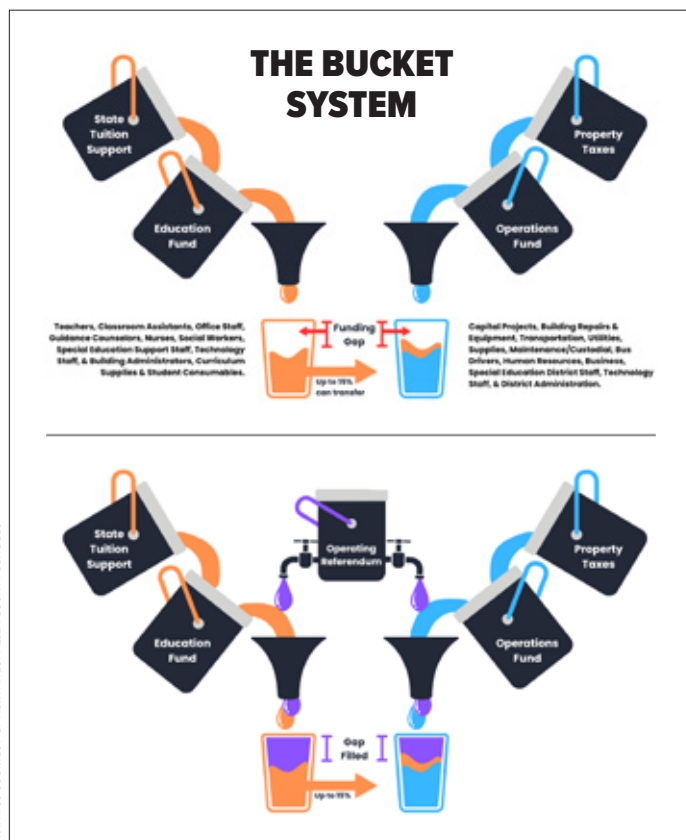
A 600-vote loss leaves little room for doubt that small shifts in strategy would have changed the outcome. For any school district or PAC entering this arena, I offer four lessons:

- 1. Pair Data with Storytelling:**
Spreadsheets show the need, but human faces show the value.
- 2. Normalize Public Support Early:**
Counteract the fear of backlash by building a broad, visible coalition of business leaders and parents early, making it safe for others to speak up.
- 3. Over-Communicate the “Bucket” System:**
Assume the public does not understand school accounting. Explain simply, repeatedly, and visually why a new building doesn’t equal a higher teacher salary.
- 4. Define the Price of Inaction:**
Do not shy away from the negative consequences. If the community chooses not to invest, they must understand exactly what is going to be cut.

We came agonizingly close. Our experience showed that facts must be felt, support must be seen, and consequences must be understood. I hope these lessons help other districts bridge that gap.



The district’s referendum page is still live and holds an extensive amount of public data and presentations at nacs.k12.in.us/referendum.





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WINNING THE LONG GAME

Inside Avon's Playbook For A Successful Referendum Renewal

By Dr. Scott Wyndham, Superintendent, and Kevin Carr, Communications Coordinator

Images courtesy of Yes 4 Avon Schools



Dr. Scott Wyndham



Kevin Carr

Referendum campaigns officially span the short, intense push between school board approval and Election Day. But the groundwork for victory is laid years in advance.

After the success of our 2018 operating referendum, Avon Community School Corporation took the same approach to transparency, open communication, and engagement that got us across the finish line and made it a permanent part of our day-to-day work. In short, sustaining community support means recognizing that the campaign never really ends.

TELLING YOUR STORY BEFORE SOMEONE ELSE DOES

If you are not telling your story, someone else will, and they may not tell it accurately or favorably. We began publishing annual referendum progress reports detailing how the additional property tax funds were helping students succeed. We created a ten-part educational series with our chief financial officer to help the community better understand school finance. We also

made a deliberate effort to ensure our annual budgeting process was transparent, with information easily accessible to the public. Through a partnership with a local hospital, we distributed yard signs at back-to-school events with the message Avon Proud, creating a visible reminder of pride in our schools.

Certainly, we can't involve students in the campaign. However, students can talk about how much they love being a part of our school corporation. We made a concerted effort to amplify their authentic voices as central to how we communicate, not by advocating directly but by illustrating impact and expressing gratitude. We created a series of "We Choose Avon" video testimonials featuring students and families talking about their experiences.

BUILDING THE RIGHT TEAM

As we approached the 2025 election seeking renewal of our referendum, one of the most important things we did was draft a winning team. Superintendent Dr. Scott Wyndham chose two highly visible and well-respected individuals from the community to lead the charge as co-chairs of our Political Action Committee (PAC). Their leadership signaled instant credibility, encouraging others to join. Approximately 40 people – mostly parents and community members – joined the PAC and led the efforts of dozens of additional volunteers.

Equally important to our campaign playbook was a dedicated social media team. From late summer through Election Day, the social media team maintained a steady, fact-based presence online by sharing accurate information, highlighting stories, and addressing misinformation before it could spread. We made sure we had a savvy, well-informed, and respectful team in place ready to spread facts and counter any falsehoods before they took root.



MEETING VOTERS WHERE THEY ARE

Dr. Wyndham operated with a simple rule. If two people were gathered, he wanted someone there to talk about the renewal. He and PAC members attended more than 80 separate meetings with parent groups, employee organizations, retirees, senior citizens, athletic clubs, performing arts boosters, and countless other community partners. Dr. Wyndham built a positive relationship with county staff responsible for elections. He also sought and secured endorsements from a broad base of community organizations, including the township board, the Chamber of Commerce, and advocacy groups.

Of the approximately 40,000 voters in our district, we spent the most time targeting those with direct ties to students. We knew they were the people most likely to support our schools. We knocked on their doors, called them on the phone, and sent them texts, postcards, and email blasts. In the end, we carried 28 of 29 precincts. The 9,000 voters that we focused on accounted for more than 50 percent of ballots cast, showing that our targeting efforts were effective.

TURNING RESISTANCE INTO OPPORTUNITY

No campaign is without opposition.

When external voices attempted to influence the narrative, we tried to view it as just another opportunity to engage and tell our story. We emphasized that the referendum was a local decision best made by the community itself. We highlighted the broad coalition of local support we had secured and kept our focus on the needs of our students and schools. We knew we had a compelling story, and we never shied away from a chance to retell it.

A LONG TERM COMMITMENT

As school leaders, we're always in "referendum mode"—building relationships, telling our story, and highlighting achievements. Ultimately, a successful referendum is the outcome of years of intentional trust building within your community.

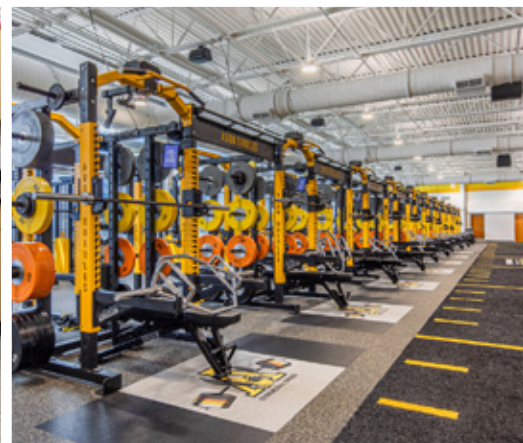
Transparency and steady community engagement ensure that when the time comes to ask for support, the community already understands why it matters. 📌



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Robin Winston

LESSONS FROM THE FRONT LINES OF **SCHOOL REFERENDUMS**

By Robin Winston and Pat Terrell, The Winston Terrell Group, Inc.



Pat Terrell

After decades spent working alongside school districts, we've learned that referendum campaigns are as much about trust as they are about numbers. At the Winston Terrell Group, we've consulted on 92 public education referendums. Seventy-one succeeded; 21 did not. And while we celebrate the wins, it's the losses that stay with us. They are the most instructive, offering a clear roadmap of what to do, and what not to do.

What follows are a few practical, field-tested strategies learned from those experiences that can help districts build community support and succeed when it matters most.

CONSISTENCY BUILDS CREDIBILITY

When you convey to the voters and the residents in your community that you're seeking a referendum, the amount that you ask for needs to be carefully determined in collaboration with your financial team. Voters should be confident that when you ask for a certain dollar amount, at a certain tax rate, with a fiscal impact for them, that you have done everything possible to arrive at that number. Changing it erodes their trust in you from the beginning. We lost a referendum in a particular district where they initially led with one number but ultimately put a higher number on the ballot.

TRANSPARENCY ISN'T OPTIONAL — IT'S ESSENTIAL

There is no such thing as a low-profile referendum campaign. Some folks try to avoid publicizing their referendum, but in today's information-rich environment, attempting to keep the details under wraps doesn't work and can be counterproductive.

Instead, districts must embrace transparency. Make the referendum a regular topic in school board meetings. Publish clear, accessible information on the district's website. Use social media proactively.

Unfortunately, one of the biggest stumbling blocks is the ballot language itself. By design, it lists maximum funding amounts and tax rates and the median homeowner impact, often making the cost appear higher than what will actually be collected. It's critical to explain this nuance early and often. When voters encounter confusing language in the voting booth, they tend to default to skepticism. Preparation ahead of time ensures clarity in the moment of decision.

UNITY AT THE TOP IS NON-NEGOTIABLE

Of all the patterns we've observed, one stands out starkly: referendums without unanimous school board support almost always struggle. In fact, of the 21 campaigns we've lost, 13 lacked full board alignment.

Division at the leadership level inevitably trickles down to the community. In one striking example, a board member openly campaigned against their own district's referendum, handing out "Vote No" literature outside polling locations. The damage from internal conflict is immediate and difficult to overcome.

A unified board sends a strong, reassuring message that the plan has been vetted, debated, and ultimately agreed upon in the best interest of students and the community.

MAKE THE "WHAT-IFS" REAL

Voters need to understand not just what a referendum funds, but what happens if it fails. Abstract consequences rarely move people but tangible ones do.

Connect the "what-ifs" to issues people care about. For example, parents need to hear that without funding to pay for teachers of Advanced Placement courses, students may lose access to college-level credit. School safety improvements may be delayed or canceled. Transportation routes may become longer or less accessible. When one district faced the possibility of implementing a two-mile walk zone for students if their referendum failed, we

invited media and the public to walk the distance with us. That experience turned a statistic into something personal and relatable.

VISIBILITY DRIVES ENGAGEMENT

When there are major events in your community, work with your folks to be present. You have to take your message to where the voter is, not assume the voter will find your message where you are. Every district is different in terms of where the community gathers. That could be a Fourth of July parade, a farmers market, a high school football game, a neighborhood street festival, or a Halloween Trunk or Treat.

Email, direct mail, and social media are essential, but they should complement, not replace, in-person outreach.

INCLUSION EXPANDS REACH

A successful campaign belongs to the entire community. Engaging a wide network of supporters amplifies your message in ways no single effort can.

Band parents, athletic boosters, and academic club already have established relationships and communication channels. When they share referendum information with their networks, it carries a level of trust that official messaging alone cannot achieve.

Encourage supporters to make calls, send texts, and have conversations. Peer-to-peer outreach is one of the most effective ways to mobilize voters.

TELL THE WHOLE STORY

School districts are often the largest, most complex organizations in their communities, but many residents don't fully understand their scope.

Think beyond classrooms. Share the broader impact:

- ▶ Millions of dollars deposited annually in local banks.
- ▶ Thousands of meals served daily.
- ▶ Extensive transportation networks operating every morning and afternoon.
- ▶ Facilities hosting thousands of after-hours community events each year.

When voters see the full picture, they better appreciate the value their schools provide.

INFORMED COMMUNITIES SAY YES

Across dozens of campaigns, we have seen that when residents are fully informed, they tend to support their local schools, even when it means higher taxes. Engagement and education are the keys. 🗳️

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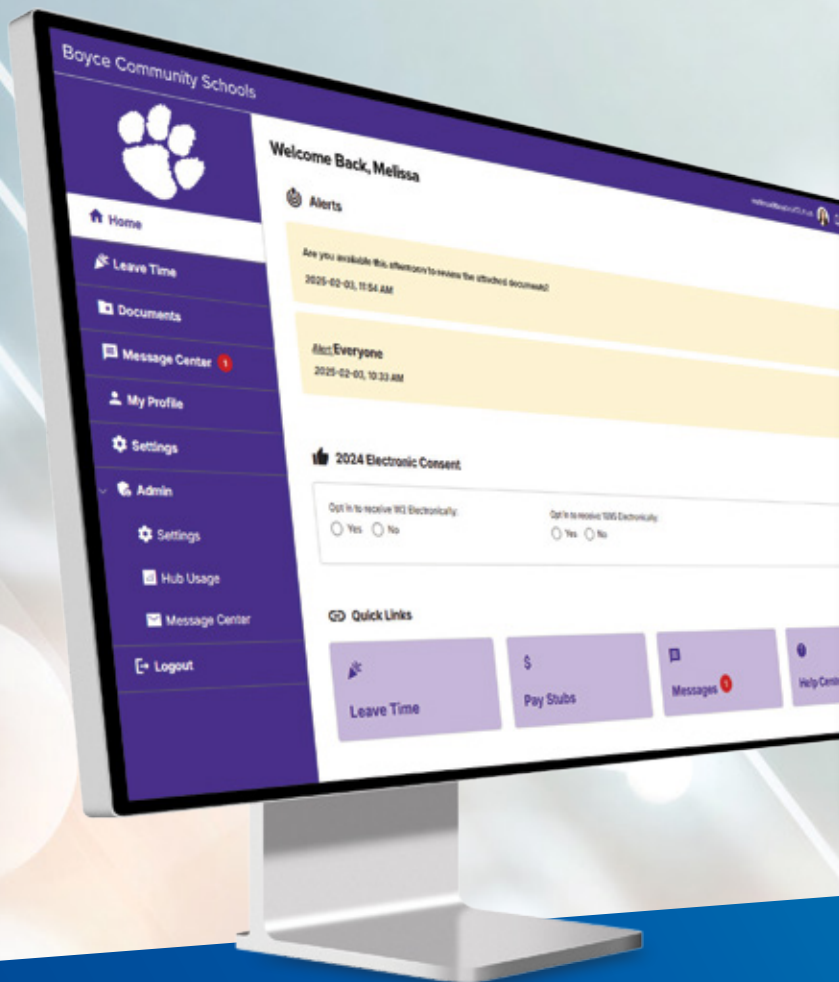
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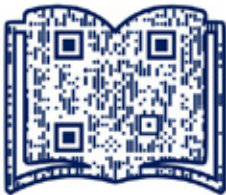
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