

**School Board Work Session**

*Work Session will begin 15 minutes after adjournment of the Business Meeting.*

1. Introductions
2. 2024 Capital Technology Levy Renewal  
*Jeff Dehler Public Relations, LLC*

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# Robbinsdale Area Public Schools

## Pre-Referendum Community Engagement Process Report

July 22, 2024

# Goal of the process

- To provide information that can help you determine whether to move forward with a referendum
- To help determine how the district should prioritize referendum fund expenditures, and
- To allow the community to provide feedback on the school board's referendum proposal, and have input into how the district spends taxpayer dollars

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# Information Obtained

- Statistically valid surveys - 400 community members; 400 parents
- Opt-in online survey - 940 district staff and family members
- Presentations to:
  - Staff
  - Financial Advisory Committee
  - PTOs
  - Somali and Spanish-speaking parents
  - American Indian Parent Advisory Committee
  - Career and Education Technology

# Key Findings

1. The community supports renewal of the capital technology levy
2. Parents and staff support spending levy funds on technology, safety and security
3. Improve School Board dysfunction and administrative management before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.

# Key Finding 1: Community Support

- The Morris Leatherman statistically valid survey found that 83% of community members would support or strongly support the capital projects levy renewal.
- Of 937 respondents to the opt-in survey (families, staff), 85% strongly agree or agree with the statement, “I support renewing the capital technology levy in the fall of 2024.”

**Conclusion:** There is strong community support for renewal of the levy.

**Recommendation:** Emphasize the positive responses of those in the community when providing information about the levy renewal prior to the November election.

# Key Finding 2: Technology, Safety & Security

- Both parents and staff rated **Technology Infrastructure as the greatest priority** at 70% and 83%, respectively.
- Secure building entrances and building security infrastructure were rated as essential or a high priority for more than 70% of respondents who completed the opt-in survey.

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**Conclusion:** Technology, safety and security are important priorities for parents and staff.

**Recommendation:** While all areas evaluated exceeded 60% for an Essential/High Priority, emphasize Technology Infrastructure and Building Security, particularly for staff members, who cited internet connectivity as a pain point in their ability to teach.

## Key Finding 3: Improve School Board dysfunction and administrative management before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.

When parents/families and staff members were asked about barriers to the success of the referendum, some cited:

- Uncertainty in district leadership, including turnover at superintendent and finance director
- Dysfunction at the school board level

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The good news: community members feel Robbinsdale Area Schools overall is doing a good job.

- 79% rate the quality of education as good or excellent
- 83% feel the district is meeting the learning needs of all or most students

## Key Finding 3: District leadership can be improved before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.

**Conclusion:** Improve School Board dysfunction and administrative management before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.

### **Recommendations:**

- The new superintendent should conduct a listening tour to learn more about community needs while also providing a clear vision for the future, then institute a new culture of excellence district-wide.
- School board members should focus on the common goal of winning the referendum by providing clear, concise, consistent factual information to the greater community.

# Summary

- 79% of residents rate Robbinsdale's quality of education as good or excellent.
- Community and staff are supportive of the renewal of the capital technology levy.
- Parents and staff support spending levy funds on technology, safety and security.
- Improve School Board dysfunction and administrative management before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.

# Thank you!

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# Pre-Referendum Community Engagement Process Report: Robbinsdale Area Public Schools

Report prepared for:

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Updated July 16, 2024

# Executive Summary

Robbinsdale Area Schools embarked on an intentional community engagement effort in the spring of 2024 prior to a proposed referendum in November 2024.

The goal of this engagement effort was to:

- Provide information that can help the school board determine whether to move forward with a referendum
- Help determine how the district should prioritize referendum fund expenditures, and
- Allow the community to provide feedback on the school board's referendum proposal, and have input into how the district spends taxpayer dollars.

The effort included a statistically valid survey of 400 community members, a statistically valid survey of 400 parents/families, and an opt-in survey of 940 family members and district staff. Further engagement included approximately 20 presentations to staff, affinity groups, and the community in May and June, and a Financial Advisory Committee meeting in May.

Key findings from the research have informed this list of three areas of opportunity:

1. The community supports renewal of the capital technology levy
2. Parents and staff support spending levy funds on technology, safety and security
3. District leadership can be improved before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.

These major areas of opportunity are the highlights of the recommendations in the report that follows.

## Situation Analysis

Robbinsdale Area Schools (ISD 281) serves all or parts of seven communities in the northwest suburbs of Minneapolis. The communities include Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Golden Valley, New Hope, Plymouth and Robbinsdale.

The district serves nearly 11,000 students in 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, two high schools, two alternative high school programs, and an online school for grades 4-12. The education program features math and engineering, fine arts, Spanish language immersion, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate. The district provides a robust community education program.

The district stretches from the Minneapolis border to the western suburbs just outside the freeway ring. Smaller post-war housing on the east side of the district transitions to newer, larger, and more expensive properties to the west. The district is racially, ethnically and economically diverse, with more than 60% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

## Referendum

Voters approved a \$3.5 million capital projects levy in 2014. Last year, due to increases in property values, the district collected \$5.9 million on that levy that has been used for technology purposes. The district is likely to ask voters to renew the levy in a November 2024 referendum.

## Environment

Research was conducted in the spring to learn more about community opinions about the school district. Anecdotally, staff, parents and students seem pleased with the educational opportunities offered by the district. Turmoil among school board members, within district administration and between the board and administration exists alongside long-standing criticism of school district leadership from a group of vocal community members. Community criticism has been mostly about management issues, from finances to transportation, and predates the pandemic by years. The district has selected a permanent superintendent, who will begin on July 1, and it has no business manager. The terms of three experienced school board members end this year. Robbinsdale's total school taxes fall in the middle of a group average of nearby and similar sized school districts.

## Key Findings

As outlined in the Executive Summary, key findings from the research have informed this list of areas of opportunity:

1. The community supports renewal of the capital technology levy
2. Parents and staff support spending levy funds on technology, safety and security
3. District leadership can be improved before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.

The areas of opportunity are recreated as categories below with in-depth analysis of key findings. Following each evaluation is a set of recommendations to help strengthen district and school communications with its internal and external stakeholders, raise awareness of the district and its offerings to potential new students and their families, and build community awareness and engagement.

### Key Finding 1: Community Support

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*Overall, the community and staff are supportive of the renewal of the capital technology levy.*

- The Morris Leatherman statistically valid survey found that 83% of community members would support or strongly support the capital projects levy renewal if it were held at the time of the survey; 13% would oppose or strongly oppose. Of those who oppose, 47% cite poor spending as their reasoning.
- Of 937 respondents (parents/families, district staff members) to the opt-in survey, 85% strongly agree or agree with the statement, "I support renewing the capital technology levy in the fall of 2024."

**Conclusion:** There is strong community support for renewal of the levy.

**Recommendation:** Emphasize the positive responses of those in the community when providing information about the levy renewal prior to the November election.

## Key Finding 2: Technology Safety & Security

*Parents and staff support spending levy funds on technology, safety and security.*

Parents/families and staff rated **Technology Infrastructure as the greatest priority** for use of levy dollars. Technology infrastructure was rated a high priority or essential by 70% of parents and 83% of staff. It is important to note that staff members rated the need for Technology Infrastructure at 13 percentage points higher than parents.

Both secure building entrances and building security infrastructure were rated as essential or a high priority for more than 70% of respondents.

***If you could choose how to spend the Capital Technology Levy dollars, how much of a priority is each of the following: [Response rate is the combined percentage of those responding “High Priority” or “Essential”]***

<b>Technology Infrastructure</b> (network hardware and software, providing secure and reliable internet access, etc.)	<b>Recurring purchases of student and teacher/staff devices</b> (iPads, Chromebooks, laptops, etc.)	<b>Classroom technology</b> (keeping audio, video, and other interactive classroom technology current and relevant)	<b>Secure Building Entrances</b> (physical changes/ construction projects)	<b>Building Security Infrastructure</b> (visitor management software, cameras, card readers, etc)
<b>76%</b>	64%	67%	71%	70%

**Conclusion:** Technology, safety and security are important priorities for parents and staff. Prioritize these areas in the use of levy funds.

**Recommendation:** While all areas evaluated exceeded 60% for an Essential/High Priority, emphasize Technology Infrastructure and Building Security, particularly for staff members, who cited internet connectivity as a pain point in their ability to teach.

## Key Finding 3: Trust in Board and Leadership

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*Improve School Board dysfunction and administrative management before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.*

This is a good news/bad news situation. The good news: community members feel Robbinsdale Area Schools overall is doing a good job.

- 79% rate the quality of education as good or excellent
- 83% feel the district is meeting the learning needs of all or most students

The bad news: when parents/families and staff members were asked about barriers to the success of the referendum, uncertainty in district leadership (superintendent and financial management) was cited as a point of concern and many termed the school board as “dysfunctional.” These sentiments were particularly apparent in the staff portion of the opt-in survey and the feedback received, following principal and program director presentations.

The open-ended survey and the principal/program director presentations both asked a similar question about what respondents believe are the greatest barriers to passing the referendum. Responses such as these were not atypical:

- “The dysfunctional school board and administrative staff. Waste of prior funds.” – From opt-in survey
- “Trust within the district. School board is a disaster. No financial director. No superintendent. Changes in administration.” (Trust and administrative issues mentioned multiple times) – From Principal/Program Director meetings

Finally, it is important to note that those citing issues with board and administration dysfunction are in the minority:

- 4% think board in-fighting is the most serious issue facing the district
- 77% believe the board and administration do what is right for children

**Conclusion:** Improve School Board dysfunction and administrative management before there is a negative impact on overall community perception of the district.

### **Recommendations:**

- The new superintendent should conduct a listening tour to learn more about community needs while also providing a clear vision for the future, then institute a new culture of excellence district-wide.
- School board members should focus on the common goal of winning the referendum by providing clear, concise, consistent factual information to the greater community.

# Appendix

## Morris Leatherman Parent Survey Summary

**Demographics:** The Morris Leatherman survey spoke with 400 community members (23% of whom are parents) with a +/-5% in 95 of 100 cases. 97% of respondents are registered voters. Morris Leatherman also conducted a survey of 400 parents, again with +/-5% in 95 of 100 cases. 93% of parent respondents are registered to vote.

### **Positive opinions about the district - Community:**

- 26% of respondents said “Good Teachers” is what they most like about the Robbinsdale Area School District.
- 79% of respondents rate the quality of education as good or excellent. (92% for parents)
- 39% believe the overall quality of the schools in the past 4 years is somewhat or much better. (54% for parents)
- 69% agree or strongly agree that during the last couple of years, the Robbinsdale Area School District School Board and Administration have spent tax money effectively and efficiently.
- The majority of respondents feel the district’s schools are a good investment, with 72% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would support a referendum to protect that investment. (89% for parents)
- 28% rate teachers and instructional staff as excellent (40% for parents) and a further 56% rate teachers and staff as good (54% for parents).

The message of “**Strong Schools = Strong Communities**” would resonate with the majority of respondents; 80% agree or strongly agree with the statement “Our community receives a good value from its investment in local public schools (91% for parents). 78% agree or strongly agree with the statement, “The high quality of the Robbinsdale Area Schools increases home values for residents in this district (90% for parents).

### **Issues for the district:**

- “Lack of Funding,” with 16% of respondents, was named the most serious issue the district faces.
- 58% of community members do not agree that Robbinsdale area schools are adequately funded. The number jumps to 76% for parents surveyed.)

**Taxes:**

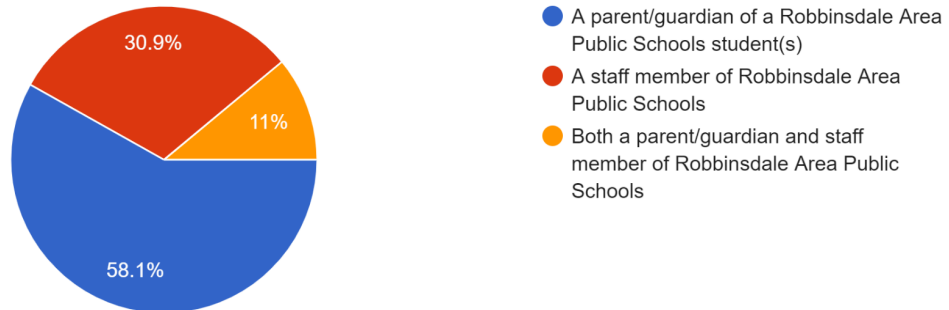
- Opinions on school taxes are about evenly split between those who believe their taxes are high and those who feel they are about average or somewhat low - 46% and 48%, respectively. Among parents, 35% feel taxes are somewhat or very high; 49% of parents believe their taxes are about average or somewhat low.
- 83% of respondents would support or strongly support the capital projects levy renewal if it were held at the time of the survey (95% of parents); 13% would oppose or strongly oppose (5% of parents). Of those overall who oppose, 47% cite poor spending as their reasoning.

**Preferred communication:** Traditional communications vehicles would be the primary information source for 31% of respondents who rely on district newsletters and the local newspaper for that information.

## Robbinsdale Opt-in Online Survey

### Total Population

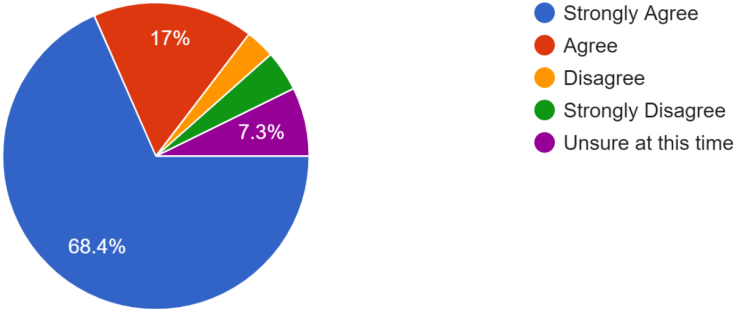
1. I am:  
936 responses



### Total Population

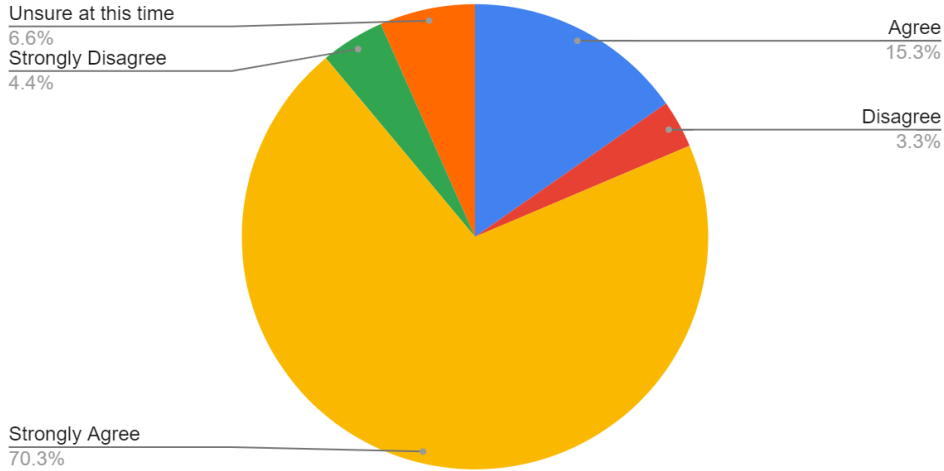
2. I support renewing the capital technology levy in the fall of 2024.

937 responses



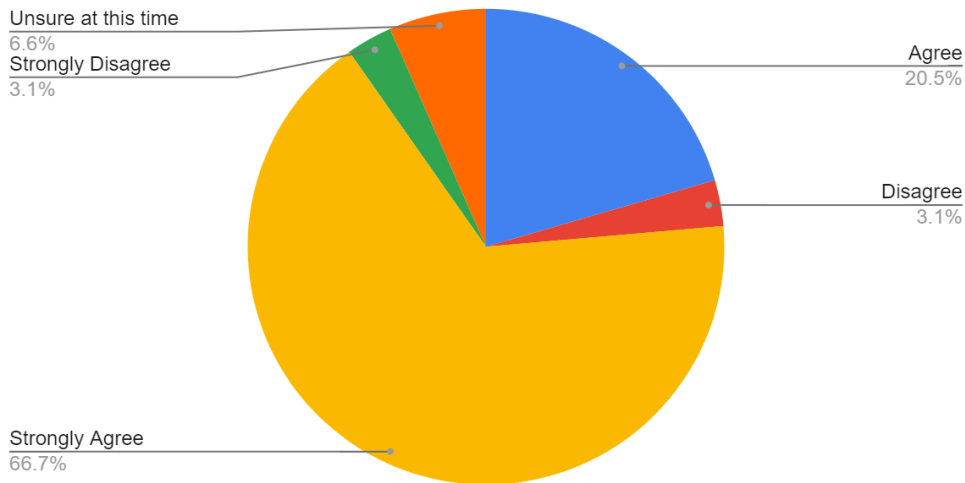
## Parents

Count of 2. I support renewing the capital technology levy in the fall of 2024.

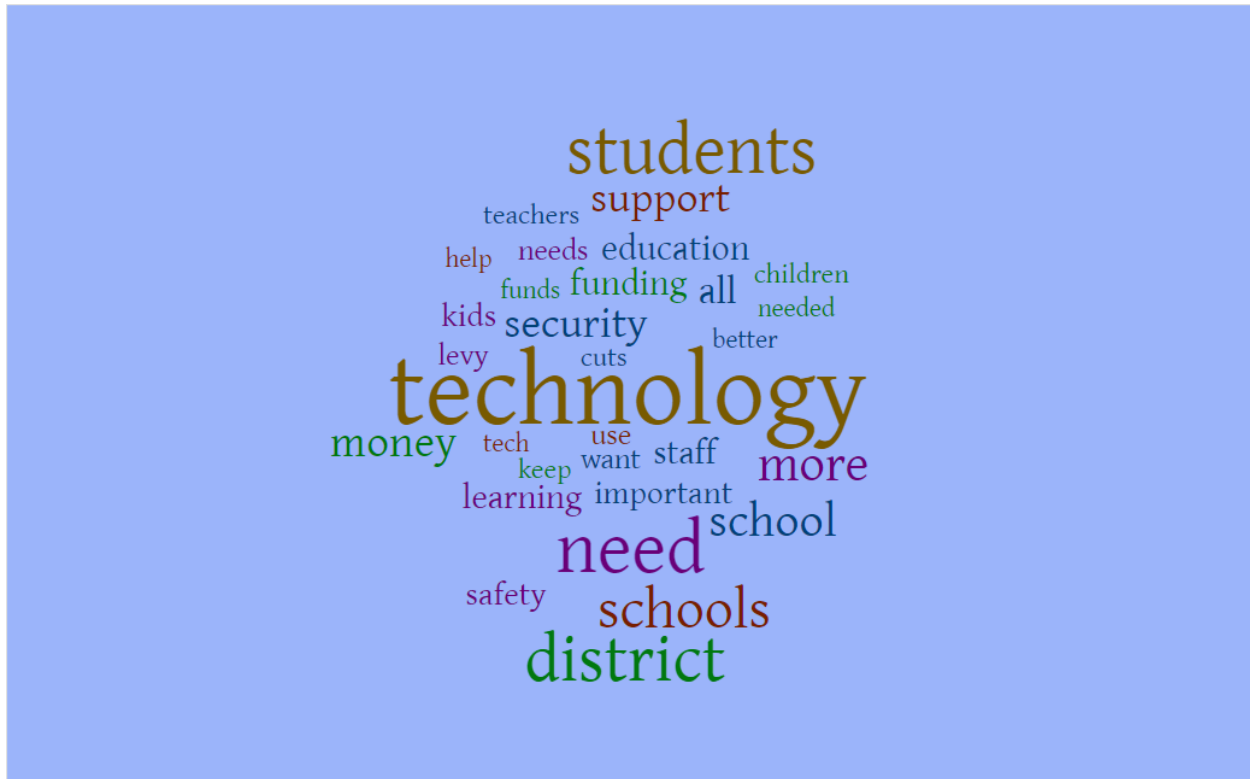


## Staff

Count of 2. I support renewing the capital technology levy in the fall of 2024.



3. Please help us understand your reasons for the response you provided to the previous item.



Sample replies:

- “Without technology, students will not be on the cutting edge of learning and being prepared for life after high school.”
- “As an employee, I always see a need for where we can improve with capital technology. For example, our WiFi is always spotty; and our chromebooks are not always reliable.”
- “There have already been enough cuts made within the school district, and I don’t want our children’s learning jeopardized further.”
- “It wouldn’t change my rate so why wouldn’t I approve it?”
- “I need to understand more about the levy and our district spending”

4. If you could choose how to spend the Capital Technology Levy dollars, how much of a priority is each of the following:

Technology Infrastructure (network hardware and software, providing secure and reliable internet access, etc.)

	Not a Priority	Low Priority	Medium Priority	High Priority	Essential
Total	3%	5%	16%	34%	42%
Parent	4%	6%	20%	200/38%	169/32%
		26%		70%	
Staff	1%	4%	12%	28%	55%
		16%		83%	
Both Parent and Staff	3%	1%	11%	28%	57%

Both parents and staff rated **Technology Infrastructure as the greatest priority** - 70% and 83% when responses of “High Priority” and “Essential” were added together, respectively. Staff rated the need for Technology Infrastructure as 13 percentage points higher than parents.

Recurring purchases of student and teacher/staff devices (iPads, Chromebooks, laptops, etc.)

	Not a Priority	Low Priority	Medium Priority	High Priority	Essential
Total	5%	7%	25%	36%	28%
Parent	6%	7%	23%	39%	25%
		30%		64%	
Staff	2%	7%	30%	31%	30%
		37%		61%	
Both Parent and Staff	4%	5%	21%	33%	36%

Recurring purchases of student and staff devices rated the lowest, but still had more than 60% finding this category to be high priority or essential.

Classroom technology (keeping audio, video, and other interactive classroom technology current and relevant)

	Not a Priority	Low Priority	Medium Priority	High Priority	Essential
Total	3%	5%	25%	40%	27%
Parent	3%	6%	23%	42%	26%
		29%		68%	
Staff	2%	5%	26%	41%	25%
		31%		66%	
Both Parent and Staff	3%	3%	32%	27%	36%

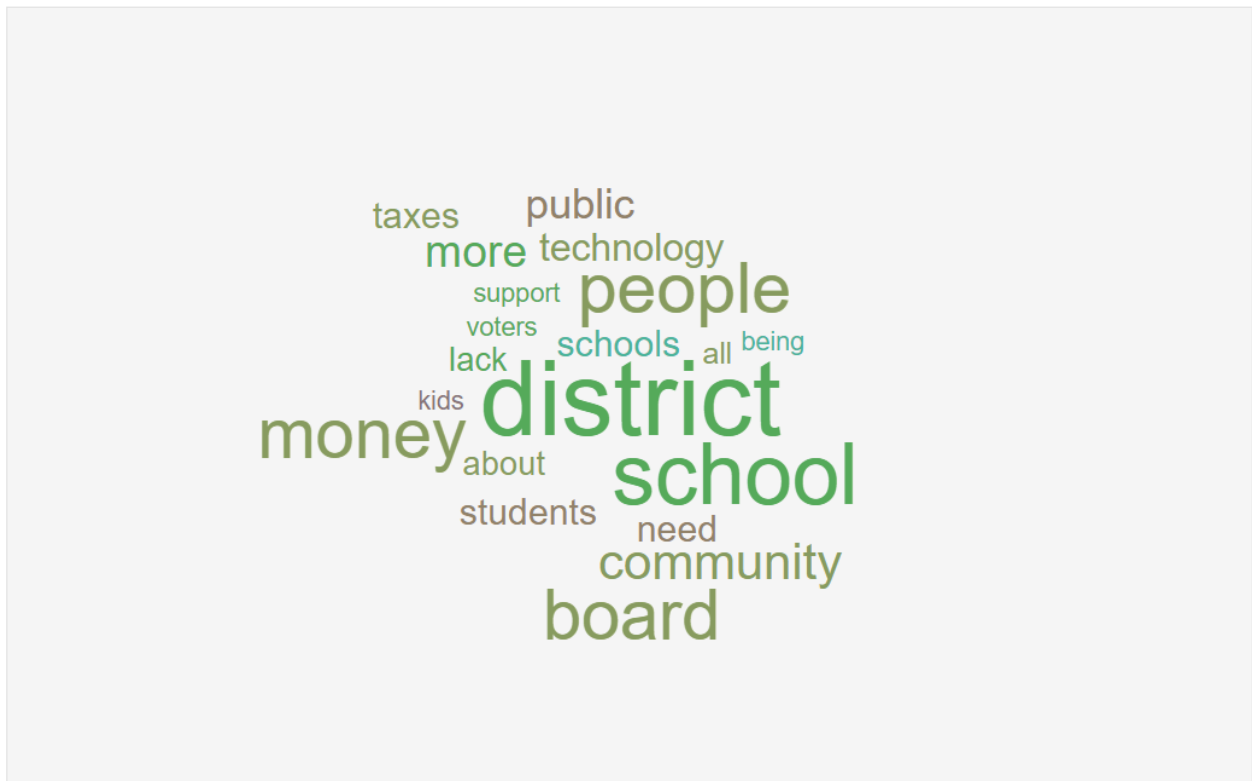
Secure Building Entrances (physical changes/ construction projects)

	Not a Priority	Low Priority	Medium Priority	High Priority	Essential
Total	5%	7%	17%	26%	45%
Parent	6%	8%	17%	26%	43%
		25%		69%	
Staff	3%	6%	18%	23%	49%
		24%		72%	
Both Parent and Staff	6%	6%	11%	29%	49%

Building Security Infrastructure (visitor management software, cameras, card readers, etc)

	Not a Priority	Low Priority	Medium Priority	High Priority	Essential
Total	5%	8%	17%	29%	41%
Parent	6%	9%	17%	31%	37%
		26%		68%	
Staff	4%	6%	17%	25%	48%
		23%		73%	
Both Parent and Staff	5%	6%	13%	28%	48%

5. In your opinion, what are the biggest obstacles to passing the referendum?



Sample replies:

- “High inflation”
- “People who don’t understand the challenges schools are facing, financially.”
- “Some people don't understand or have no knowledge of this referendum”
- “The dysfunctional school board and administrative staff. Waste of prior funds.”
- “People won't want taxes raised”
- “The public perception of our district and its lack of transparency in budgets”

## Feedback from Principals and Program Directors

Approximately 20 presentations were made in May and June to:

- District staff
- Financial Advisory Committee
- PTOs
- Somali and Spanish-speaking parents
- American Indian Parent Advisory Committee
- Career and Education Technology

Feedback was collected from a small number of these groups and included the following:

### **If you could choose how to spend Capital Projects Levy dollars, what would be your highest priorities?**

- “Updated devices. Internet working. Security” (multiple responses about Internet functionality)
- “Updating security: cameras and doors” (multiple responses about building security)
- “Staff and student computers”

### **What would you say are the biggest barriers to success of the referendum?**

- “Trust within the district. School board is a disaster. No financial director. No superintendent. Changes in administration.” (Trust and administrative issues mentioned multiple times)
- “My kids don’t need to spend more time on technology.”
- “Rising cost & fixed incomes”
- “It is unclear how much a homeowner is currently paying towards this levy - so people don’t know what’s being renewed” (Understanding what is being asked for and why mentioned multiple times)

### **What are reasons why you believe community members would support a referendum?**

- “They want the best for our students” (this, competitiveness with other schools and student retention mentioned multiple times)
- “It isn’t an increase in funding, it maintains their current tax level” (mentioned multiple times)
- If it benefits them as voters in some way

- Having kids attending school in our district
- “Community members who understand the benefits of having a successful school” (mentioned multiple times)

### **Would you help to support a referendum by volunteering your time?**

- “Maybe.” (Mentioned a few times)
- “No. I did in the past when I felt more highly valued and I had a clearer understanding of our district finances.”

### **Feedback from Somali-speaking affinity group**

- Ideas for how the funding would be used
- Metal detectors at the entrances of the buildings for safety/security
- Technology needs for students
- Adding more cameras in the schools

### **Feedback from Spanish-speaking affinity group**

- Parents do support extending this levy (**Technology**)
  - It is necessary to upgrade the use of technology nowadays with everything changing
  - Students when they come home often tell us that they are having issues at school with their internet or computer (Mentioned multiple times)
  - “Cybersecurity is really important in the aspect of keeping students and staff’s personal information safe, so investing some of that money is necessary”
- **Building level**
  - “Parents want more security at the building level” (multiple mentions)
  - “Some parents were asking if this money (if extended) could be used to hire security people to prevent fights”
  - “If there is no safety at school it doesn’t matter how much money is invested in computers, classrooms (smart boards); safety should be a top priority in any building”
- **Levy - Votes**
  - “Most of the parents that were in attendance did support the levy, however, the biggest issue was not being able to vote, so many of them felt that regardless of what they said it would not matter.”
  - “Families don’t want to see the district keep making cuts on staff as it could have a tremendous impact on the student learning outcomes and could potentially lead to families moving their students to other schools”
  - “Families are okay with the fact that the rate is not changing”

## **Financial Advisory Committee**

The Financial Advisory Committee (FAC) met in May and reviewed a slide presentation describing past referenda and their purposes, as well as gaining an understanding of current needs within the district. Questions were gathered from participants to be used in future

Frequently Asked Questions for publication in print materials and the referendum website. Questions included asking about how money was intended to be spent in past levies and if the revenue was spent as intended, and how to make best use of the levy dollars.

## Consultant Team

This report was compiled by DehlerPR, a public relations agency specializing in public sector communications and public relations with more than 20 years' experience with public schools, internal and external communications, and community relations. Jeff Dehler, APR, is the founder and president of DehlerPR. Since 1997, Jeff has led communications efforts for a top-10 Minnesota school district, a metro area county, and the state's first commuter rail line. He is a member of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), and the Minnesota School Public Relations Association (MinnSPRA). Jeff's associates Jayne Helgevold and Krisanthy Sikkila were instrumental in completing segments of this report and acting as researchers and sounding boards

## Principles of Organizational Communication

In determining recommendations for Robbinsdale Area Public Schools' communications planning, we look at the key findings through a lens of guiding principles used by organizations who are effective communicators. These principles are culled from NSPRA, the Public Relations Society of America, *Cutlip & Center's Effective Public Relations*, and other sources.

- Be true to your vision, mission and values. Honesty, respect, integrity and fairness are critical to the success of any organization, but especially those in the public trust.
- Communication is a management function: strategically tie communications goals to district and school goals.
- Listen to stakeholders and respond appropriately. If something can be changed, change it; if it can't be changed, explain why.
- Be clear, concise and consistent in all communication.
- School building-level communication is most effective. Community members identify with a school or schools, not necessarily with the district as a whole. The most trusted source of information about a student, the school or the school district is the principal, teacher or other staff member. Make sure your staff knows what is going on and why.
- Two-way communication ensures an engaged, active, successful community. Ask stakeholders to do something for students, from providing feedback to taking more significant action.