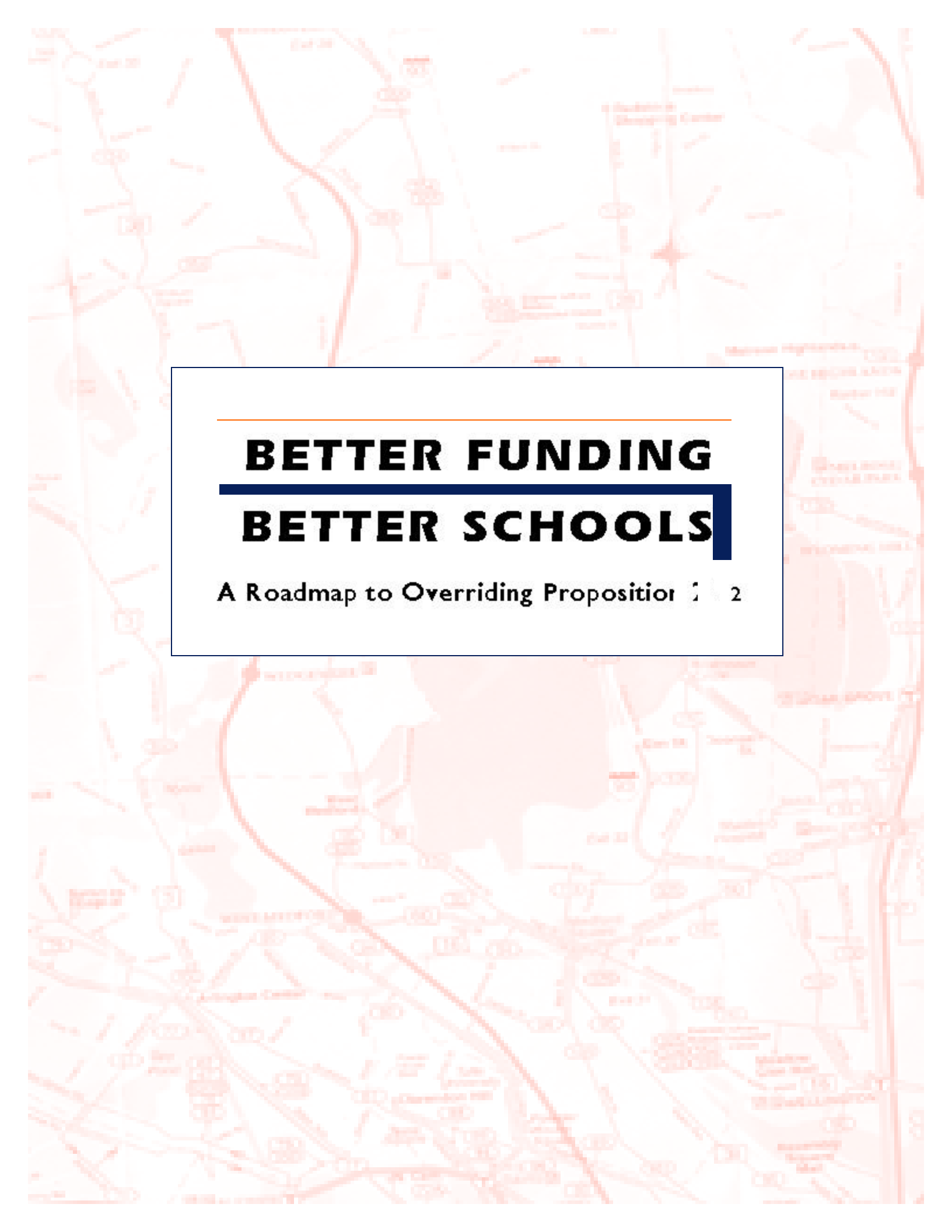


The background of the entire page is a faded, light red map of the San Francisco Peninsula. It shows major highways like the Golden Gate Bridge, I-805, and I-680, as well as various cities and landmarks. The map is oriented with San Francisco at the top and San Jose at the bottom.

BETTER FUNDING BETTER SCHOOLS

A Roadmap to Overriding Proposition 13

BETTER FUNDING BETTER SCHOOLS

A Roadmap to Overriding Proposition 2 ½

By Laura Barrett, MTA Communications
Design by Nina Kumysh

This manual was produced for MTA staff and local leaders to assist in Proposition 2 ½ override efforts. Additional copies may be obtained through MTA Regional Offices or MTA Communications in the Boston office.

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Massachusetts Teachers Association
20 Ashburton Place, Boston, MA 02108

Phone 617.742.7590

Fax 617.742.7046

Web: www.massteacher.org

BETTER FUNDING

BETTER SCHOOLS

A Roadmap to Overriding Proposition 2 ½

Introduction

Many communities in Massachusetts eventually face a common problem: There is not enough money in their municipality's budget to offer students the kinds of educational services they, and their teachers, deserve. The problem could be run-down buildings, large class sizes, no full-day kindergarten, lack of technology, low teacher salaries, pending layoffs or a host of other concerns. Or perhaps the funding is needed, not because the schools have deteriorated, but because community residents are seeking to turn a good school system into a great one.

There are three main sources of funding in which to tap to improve schools: the federal, state or municipal governments. It is very important for teachers to play an active role, both individually and through their associations, in seeking more federal and state dollars for their communities. At some point, however, teachers are likely to face the prospect of needing to join parents, school committee members and other school supporters in advocating for more local funds for public education. If their community is already levying property taxes at the legally allowable limit established under the 1980 law known as Proposition 2 ½, they are going to have to support a Proposition 2 ½ override. (Unless otherwise noted, the term "override" is used generically in this manual to refer to all three mechanisms for raising taxes above the limits established by Proposition 2 ½: an override of the levy limit for operating expenses, a debt exclusion or a capital outlay expenditure exclusion. All three are defined below in "What is a Proposition 2 ½ Override?").

The purpose of this manual is to provide local education association leaders with information on the different override options and guidance on how to participate in an effective override campaign. There is no right or wrong way to run an override campaign, but there is good information about what has worked well and what has backfired in other communities. Of course, no two situations are exactly alike. Association leaders should work closely with their UniServ representatives when considering override options. MTA staff from other divisions may be called in to help with the campaign, if necessary.

Participating in an override campaign can be a lot of work, but it also can be a positive experience with many long-term benefits. The most obvious benefit is that a victory means better funding for your schools. Less obvious, but also very important, is that override campaigns can help build more effective associations and forge stronger ties between teachers and their communities.

SECTION 1

Before Placing an Override Question on the Ballot...

If your district's elected officials already have voted to place an override question on the ballot, you can skip most of this section. It means important decisions already have been made about *what* the override will be for, *how large* it will be and *when* it will be on the ballot. It is also likely that *who* will spearhead the campaign has been decided.

If your association or community is still weighing whether, when and how to conduct an override campaign, read this section first.

What is Proposition 2 ½?

Proposition 2 ½ was a statewide ballot initiative proposed in 1980 by anti-tax activists who were seeking to limit both the total amount of tax dollars a municipality could raise and the rate of increase in the future. Proposition 2 ½ was approved by the voters. It affected both property taxes and auto excise taxes. Specifically regarding property taxes, the law had two main components: a levy ceiling, which limits the total amount that can be raised in any given year; and a levy limit, which limits the rate of increase from one year to the next.

Under the levy ceiling, a community cannot raise (levy) taxes exceeding 2.5 percent of the total full and fair cash value of all taxable property in the community. The levy limit restricts levy *increases* to 2.5 percent above the previous year's levy limit, plus increases to account for new growth in the community.

The effect of the initiative was swift. Many communities had to cut their budgets dramatically in the early 1980s, leading to school closings and the layoff of thousands of teachers and other municipal employees.

In the mid-1980s, the state economy improved and state revenues increased. The state legislature began to send more money back to communities for local aid, including school aid. Some of the negative impact of 2 ½ was blunted.

When the economy and state revenues declined in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, state aid to communities was cut and school budgets were hit hard. Once again, there were layoffs. Consequently, there was a spike in the number of communities seeking Proposition 2 ½ overrides, a trend which peaked in 1991.

After passage of the 1993 Education Reform Act and a court ruling that year (*McDuffy v. The Secretary of the Executive Office of Education*) requiring a more equitable school funding system, the state increased its contribution

to local schools, particularly in low-income districts. The number of override attempts declined steeply until 1999, but has begun to rise again since then.

There are a number of factors to explain why the number of override attempts may continue to rise for a while. Major state income tax cuts were approved by the voters in November 2000, and those reductions are being phased in through 2004. Simultaneously, the downturn in the economy has already led to a significant drop in revenues and cuts in some educational programs. Other factors come into play in certain districts. Communities that receive minimal aid from the state and that have experienced significant enrollment increases are already feeling a financial squeeze. Also, many districts that need to rebuild or renovate their schools are proposing debt exclusions to help fund those projects. All of these factors are likely to fuel the demand for override votes in the future.

Below is a brief look at Proposition 2½ override options. More detail about Proposition 2½ is contained in *Levy Limits: A Primer on Proposition 2½* by the Department of Revenue's Division of Local Services, which is available online at www.dls.state.ma.us.

What is a Proposition 2½ Override?

There are three different ways a community can increase property taxes above the levy limit. All of them are informally referred to as “overrides,” though only one results in a permanent override of the levy limit while two constitute temporary exclusions from the law's constraints. All three have a different impact on local revenues.

Override of the Levy Limit: This is an initiative placed on the ballot to *permanently* increase the levy limit by a specified amount for a specified purpose, such as increasing funds to hire more teachers to reduce class size or increase the number of police officers. Overrides are qualified for the ballot by a majority vote of a community's selectmen or town or city council (with the mayor's approval, if required by law) and must be approved by a majority of the electorate.

Debt Exclusion: This is a *temporary* exclusion from the levy limit for purposes of raising funds for debt service costs; for example, to service the debt on funds borrowed to rebuild or renovate one or more schools or to build a new fire station. The increase in the limit lasts only as long as the debt is being repaid.

Capital Outlay Expenditure Exclusion: This is a *one-year* increase in the levy limit for the purpose of raising funds for capital project costs; for example, to purchase a new fire engine or upgrade technology in the schools.

The two exclusions require a two-thirds vote of the community's selectmen, or town or city council (with the mayor's approval, if required by law), and must be approved by the majority of the electorate.

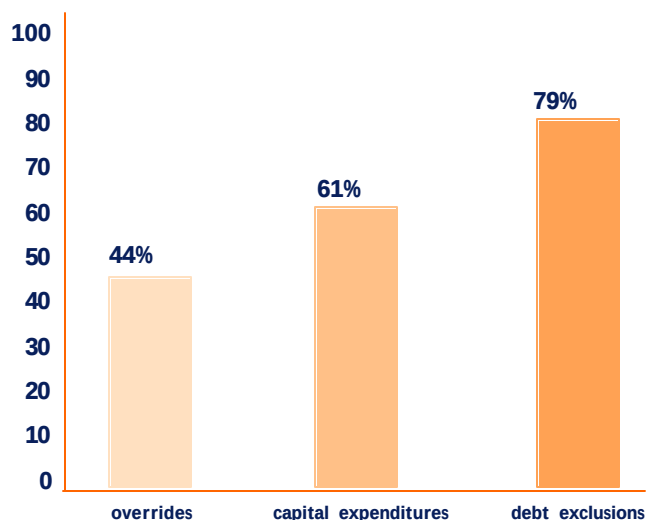
Underride: Proposition 2½ also allows a community to cut its levy limit by passing an underride. This can be placed on the ballot with a majority vote of a community's selectmen, or town or city council, or by individuals using the local initiative process. It must be approved by a majority of voters. There have been very few successful underride initiatives in the state.

What Is the Recent History of Override Votes?

The DOR's Division of Local Services provides data on override votes online at www.dls.state.ma.us under "Municipal Data Bank" and periodically publishes override analyses in *City & Town*, which is also available at that Web address. The most recent analyses were published in May 1998, June 2000 and Nov./Dec. 2001. Below are highlights from these reports.

- ◆ Both the number of overrides approved and the dollar amount added to local levies peaked in FY91 and declined sharply until FY99. The number began to rise again during the subsequent two years. This trend shows the strong relationship between the strength of the economy and the number of overrides attempted and approved. The economy was very weak in the early 1990s and state aid to cities and town was cut, leading to the spike in overrides. The economy was much stronger in the mid- and late-1990s and state aid grew, significantly reducing the demand for overrides (1998 and 2001 reports).
- ◆ Although state aid did continue to grow after 1999, *City & Town* offers the following explanation for the increase in education-related initiatives in that time: "Some school superintendents have indicated that significant increases in operating costs, such as salaries, fuel, technology and basic supplies, such as text books, are likely contributors to the upward trend in override proposals for education in FY00 and FY01 (2001 report).
- ◆ Smaller communities (pop. 3,370 and under) historically have added a greater percentage to their levy limits through overrides (19 percent on average) than have larger communities (2 percent on average) (1998 report).
- ◆ Wealthier communities were more likely to approve overrides than poorer communities (1998 report).
- ◆ School districts in which a relatively high percentage of the population is composed of students who attend public schools were more likely to approve overrides than districts with a small percentage. Those with a high percentage (18.6 percent and above) approved overrides totaling 8.6 percent of the levy limit, while those with a low percentage (14.5 percent and below) approved overrides totaling 2 percent of the limit (1998 report).
- ◆ From FY94-FY01, there were more education overrides proposed than for any other services. Education overrides averaged 18.2 percent from FY94-FY98. However, the number decreased to 5 in FY99, but rose to 24 in FY00 and 23 in FY01. This increase in education overrides accounts for the bulk of the increase in overrides altogether (2001 report).
- ◆ Looking at school referenda from 1994-2001, debt exclusions were both the most common and the most likely to succeed. There were 549 debt exclusion proposals, of which 79 percent were approved. There were 276 override questions, of which 44 percent were approved. There were 51 capital exclusion questions, of which 61 percent were approved (2001 report).
- ◆ The success rate for all Proposition 2 ½ referenda (for education and other services) has increased in recent years. For example, while only a third (34.5 percent) of the levy limit overrides passed in 1994, nearly two-thirds (62%) passed in 2001 (2001 report).

Percentage of education-related ballot initiatives by type approved by voters from 1994–2001



The Division of Local Services' studies do not address an issue that is of great interest to proponents of referenda to improve public schools: the relative success rates for override questions depending on how many services are to be funded. Some override questions just seek funds for a single purpose, such as schools. Others seek funding for several municipal services, such as schools, public safety and public works, and ask the voters for an up-or-down vote on the funding for all services together. (This is sometimes referred to as "bundling.") A third type of override, sometimes called a "menu" or "unbundled" option, lists different services and the funding amounts requested and requires a "yes" or "no" vote on the different services. Additional analysis also would be helpful to determine if overrides have fared better historically when they were voted on during a special election, at which the override was the only question on the ballot, or during a general election, when other candidates and/or issues are on the ballot.

Since these analyses have not been done, most communities will have to fall back on their own political instincts and experience to determine how to proceed. A couple of common sense points to consider:

- ◆ Whatever funds are sought must be targeted to meet a need that is compelling and widely acknowledged in the community;
- ◆ The level of funding should not exceed the level needed to meet local needs;
- ◆ A strong case must be made that the funds *currently* being raised are being spent wisely;
- ◆ The increase should take into consideration the income levels in the community;
- ◆ The override sought should not violate the "sore thumb" rule, i.e., the amount of money being raised and the services for which it is being raised should not stick out like a sore thumb relative to taxes and services in nearby or comparable communities. ■

Who Will Support the Override Effort?

Before a local association becomes active in an override effort, it is important to think about the level of support among voters, community leaders and local association members.

Determining public support can be difficult. Larger communities that have the resources and expertise to do a public opinion poll may choose to do so before deciding whether to proceed. Polling can be helpful in identifying which arguments move the voters the most and which subsets of voters are likely to support the question (see appendix).

Activists in most small- and mid-sized communities will not have the resources needed to conduct a poll and will have to rely on their experience and political judgment to determine if the override vote has a chance of succeeding.

No campaign can succeed without the support of a core group of respected leaders. Leaders of school override campaigns often include parents, school officials (such as the superintendent), city or town officials (including school committee members), teachers and their local association. Other constituencies could include religious and civic groups, business leaders, student groups, realtors and senior organizations. Many of these leaders will be part of a formal ballot committee – a committee which must be formed before any money can be raised or spent on the campaign (see p.7).

Finally, it is important for local association leaders to evaluate the level of the support among members who work in the district. Some of these members

will be community residents while others will not. All will benefit if the override is approved and should be asked to play a role in supporting the question. While association members have sometimes been very active in override campaigns, too often they have taken a back seat to parents, even though their professional lives are directly affected.

Later in this manual we will describe various ways to involve members in the override effort. At this stage, it is most important to determine if members would support an override if one was proposed. One way to gauge support would be to call a general membership meeting at which the issues are explained and members are asked to air their views. A straw poll could be held to determine initial enthusiasm for the effort. An additional method would be to distribute a brief survey to members and ask if they would vote for an override and, also, if they would actively campaign for it.

Do not be discouraged by a lukewarm response to an initial inquiry. Sometimes it takes a campaign and a growing sense of urgency to build enthusiasm for an override. However, if a significant number of local members who live in the community are actively opposed to the override, that does not bode well for the association's involvement in a successful campaign. If there is a compelling need for new school funding, however, it should be possible to generate enthusiasm for the effort among association members.

Once the decision has been made to place an override on the ballot, then the campaign begins.

SECTION 2.

So There's Going To Be an Override Campaign...

Once a ballot question has been approved by the requisite town leaders and the election date has been set, it is time for override leaders to develop and implement a winning strategy.

If a ballot committee was not formed before the question was filed, it is important to do so as soon as possible for both legal and organizational purposes. This committee will have to be familiar with state laws regarding campaign activities, particularly around filing the proper forms and raising funds.

Follow the Money... and the Rules

Ballot committee officers must select a name for the committee, file a form with local election officials identifying the committee chairperson, treasurer and other officers, and be prepared to file campaign finance reports listing contributors and expenditures.

Although this does require attention to detail, the process is easily mastered by ordinary citizens who have no legal training. One of the most important requirements they must monitor and inform supporters about is the

prohibition against public employees, including teachers, raising funds for ballot question campaigns. Here is a partial list of the restrictions:

- ◆ Public employees may not solicit funds for a ballot question, including hosting a fundraising event, asking for contributions or permitting their names to be listed on campaign stationery as an officer or supporter if that stationery is used to solicit funds.
- ◆ Public employees may not serve as treasurer of the ballot question committee, since that would violate the law prohibiting soliciting funds.
- ◆ Public buildings, such as schools or town hall, may not be used in any fundraising effort for a campaign.
- ◆ Public employees may not engage in campaign activities during work hours or use public equipment or supplies for the campaign.

Of course, there is a lot that public employees can do to help the effort, including making their own voluntary contributions to the campaign, sending “dear friend” cards, using a local e-mail contact list to urge friends to vote “yes,” and phoning voters for support. Because of the prohibition on fundraising, in many communities parent activists who are not public employees are primarily responsible for soliciting funds for the campaign effort.

Before engaging in any campaign activities, it is important to obtain more detailed information about the laws and regulations from the Office of Campaign and Political Finance. That office will provide ballot question supporters with a packet of information on the process, including two important guides: “Campaign Finance Guide: Municipal Ballot Question Committees,” and “Campaign Finance Guide: Public Employees, Public Resources and Political Activity.” OCPF is located in Boston at One Ashburton Place, directly across from MTA’s Boston Office. The office can be reached at 617-727-8352 or online at www.state.ma.us/OCPF

Developing a Strategy

Ballot campaign leaders also must agree upon a strategy. All other steps in the campaign will stem from these early decisions. There are several factors to consider when developing a strategy. The strategy suggestions below are based on interviews with MTA staff and local leaders who have participated in override campaigns.

- ◆ How should school override supporters proceed if funding for several services is on the ballot?

If the only question on the ballot concerns schools, a single committee will likely develop and implement the strategy for winning. But what should you do if the ballot question calls for funding for other public services, such as public works, public safety or recreation?

If you have the resources to conduct a poll, the results should indicate relative support for raising taxes for the different kinds of services and that will help shape your strategy. If you are not able to poll, your actions will have to be guided by experience, knowledge of the community and common sense.

- ◆ Should supporters plan a highly visible public relations effort or a lower profile voter ID and “get out the vote” (GOTV) effort?

Most people who have worked on electoral campaigns imagine that a campaign for a ballot question will be similar: name recognition, high visibility and free and paid media are all keys to success. Do not make that assumption about a ballot question. MTA staff and leaders who have been involved in override campaigns say the opposite is sometimes true. They report that many successful override campaigns are not highly visible, but instead concentrate on three steps:

1. Identify your likely supporters.
2. Contact these likely supporters to inform them about the initiative, seek their support and identify those who say they will vote “yes” on election day.
3. Call the “yes” voters at election time to urge them to go to the polls.

Be advised that running a low-profile campaign does not mean running a laid-back campaign. The workload is just as great in either case, it's just that some energy, planning and resources are allocated differently. A low-profile approach is most likely to succeed if the override is the only

If there is a *single* ballot question to raise funds for *several* public services, logic dictates there should be a single campaign with leaders representing the various stakeholders working together. The complication arises in a menu-style campaign where voters are required to vote “yes” or “no” on funding proposals for a number of different services. Often, stakeholders for these different services run their own campaigns and do not coordinate with one another. This could be a serious mistake.

If each constituency is following a different strategy, the campaign efforts of all could flounder. That is particularly true if the different constituencies are seen as competing with one another for votes and undercutting funding requests for other services. Voters may say “a pox on all their houses” and vote “no” on everything. It is best if the stakeholders for each issue in a menu-style campaign work together cooperatively. In the final analysis, money is fungible. That means if funding for schools is approved but funding for public safety is defeated, schools may benefit more in the short run, but over the long haul the demand for public safety services could end up siphoning money that otherwise would have gone to the schools. ■

issue being voted on in a special election. In that case, a relatively small percentage of the electorate is likely to vote, and those who do vote generally have a special interest in this particular issue – for or against it.

If, on the other hand, the override vote is held during a general election in which a large percentage of the electorate is expected to go to the polls, it may be necessary to run a more visible campaign in which you seek public support from candidates for office, raise the issue at public forums, seek media attention and publicize the override with signs, bumper stickers, buttons, and so on. If you are running a highly visible campaign, that doesn't mean you can ignore identifying your supporters and getting out the vote, it's just that those efforts will be supplemented with more visible activities. ■

Timeline and Budget

While presidential election campaigns seem to go on for four years, local ballot referenda campaigns generally last anywhere from several weeks to several months, though some are planned a year or more in advance. It is important to use that time wisely by developing a campaign timeline working back from election day. The specifics of a timeline will depend on the size of the community, the amount of time, the nature of the override question and the nature of the campaign.

Similarly, the majority of campaigns will have a budget and will have to engage in some fundraising efforts, but how much depends on similar factors.

The UniServ Consultant for Sharon reports that a low-profile 1999 campaign in that community to raise teacher salaries was successful even though proponents spent virtually no money. That effort centered around winning the support of school and community leaders and making targeted phone calls to likely supporters. The consultant warns that success was based on an unusual set of circumstances that are not likely to be replicated elsewhere.

The vast majority of campaigns will require some funding for literature production, phones, stamps and office supplies. Additional costs could include short-term rental of office space and equipment, coffee and/or food for volunteers, Web site maintenance and advertising. ■

Worcester Experience:

Low Profile Was Key to Success

According to an MTA UniServ representative, the key to a successful override for Worcester schools back in 1991 was a low-profile campaign that focused on identifying favorable voters and reminding them to vote.

That initiative featured a slate of override questions for six services: police, fire, elder affairs, public health, library and schools. Some supporters of the schools initiative wanted to launch a highly visible campaign with lawn signs, ads, bumper stickers and a barrage of media. MTA staff counseled a very different strategy.

After much debate, the coalition of supporters went with the MTA approach. According to a *Telegram & Gazette* article (June 26, 1991), a network of about 500 parents, teachers and other volunteers formed phone trees at each school and from there formed a phone bank that operated out of a conference room at Clark University.

Twelve precincts were identified as strong because they had a history of high voter turnout and because a large percentage of voters contacted early on said they would support the override.

On election day, poll watchers were stationed in the key precincts and, toward the end of the day, 1,000 registered voters who said they favored the override but who had not yet voted were called and urged to get to the polls. The coalition also advised supportive voters who said they were going to be out of town on election day – including university students who had left town for the summer – how to vote by absentee ballot. Some 900 absentee ballots were cast in that election.

By contrast, MTA staff said, advocates for several of the other initiatives relied on high-visibility public relations campaigns, using signs, public

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speaking and the media. A photo on the front page of the *Telegram & Gazette* reporting the results of the election shows campaigners holding large signs: “Vote YES on the police override. You can’t afford NOT to!” and “SAVE Worcester Fire Dept. Vote Yes on 2: Help us – Help you.”

At the end of the day, the schools initiative was the only one to pass, albeit narrowly. The other five questions were soundly defeated.

The moral of the story, according to MTA staff, was that the labor intensive but well-managed “voter id” campaign was the more effective strategy in that circumstance. ■

Message, Materials, and Media

How, and how much, you use the media depends on whether you have planned a high- or low-visibility campaign. Even if the plan is to run a low-profile one, there will be some publicity about the issue. If your community is served by a local newspaper, there probably will be several articles about the issues, letters to the editor and an editorial. Override supporters must be prepared for this level of coverage, and perhaps more if the opponents run an active and visible campaign or if the local media – including radio and TV – is aggressive about covering it. Campaigns in big cities also will be covered in the major daily newspapers and on commercial television, and some campaigns in smaller communities will be covered by the dailies.

If you are running a low-profile campaign, you should refrain from issuing press releases or generating a lot of letters to the editor. If you are running a high-visibility campaign, it will be important to get your message out in public forums and the media. All the tools of media relations can be used, including press releases, publicizing events, letters-to-the-editor, radio and cable TV talk shows and paid advertisements (see *Mastering the Art of Media Relations* in the appendix).

Whether the campaign is low- or high-visibility, you should plan to meet with the editors of the local newspapers; they will most likely editorialize on the override and you want to make sure they

Arlington Experience: High-Visibility and Voter ID Turned the Tide

Barbara Goodman, a Lexington teacher and Arlington School Committee member, said that two highly visible campaigns which also included voter ID and getting out the vote led to wide margins in favor of raising taxes to rebuild the town’s seven elementary schools in 1998 and 2000.

The town placed its first debt exclusion question on the ballot in 1997. That year, the campaign was relatively quiet and the voter identification was not comprehensive. Supporters believed they made a compelling case for passing the override to rebuild some very old schools, and they were shaken up when the initiative lost by only 16 votes.

School supporters decided to take no chances for the next two initiatives. Goodman was one of the leaders of those campaigns. She outlined the following elements of their effort.

They started organizing seven or eight months before election day. They began by talking one-to-one with all of the local political and civic leaders in town, including all the school committee members, selectmen and even the opposition. They formed a steering committee on which diverse interests were represented.

They spent a long time developing the message, and creating different written materials for delivering the message, from bumper stickers (“REBUILD Arlington’s Neighborhood Schools”) to fact sheets for precinct captains and others who needed to know details.

Developing a good database in which frequent voters were identified and targeted was important.

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hear your message. A group of no more than four or five override supporters should attend this meeting, and your group should include a parent, an educator and a town or city leader who is respected by the local media.

Communicating effectively about the issue will require you to develop a consistent, coherent message early in the campaign. This message should be simple, should include no more than three or four points, and should be repeated in all the different

Murray Fishel, a campaign consultant who has worked with Citizen Action and other progressive organizations and candidates, has developed some key points to bear in mind while developing campaign messages. Here are two of them.

Political Communications Realities

- ◆ Just because you're talking doesn't mean they're listening.
- ◆ Just because they're listening doesn't mean they like what they hear.
- ◆ Just because they like what they hear doesn't mean they'll do what you want.
- ◆ Just because they'll do what you want doesn't mean you'll win.
- ◆ Everyone in politics talks at the same time.
- ◆ We all compete against each other and every commercial advertiser simultaneously.

(From Political Campaign Management Training, prepared by Citizen Action, June 1995)

The voter list was used in several ways for both mailings and phone calls.

They did a townwide leaflet drop, targeted mailings to frequent voters, and mailings to different constituencies, including the local teachers' association and seniors. Virtually every politician in town sent a letter to his or her personal list of supporters.

They held coffee klatches and forums, which Goodman said were not well attended, but were one strategy for identifying activists and contributors.

The media effort was actively coordinated, with many-letters-to-the-editor from different interest and editorial board meetings. A cable television spot in favor of the override was produced and aired repeatedly on the public access channel. They had stand-outs with signs and distributed bumper stickers. The one visibility they tended to avoid was debates. Since supporters were so much better organized, why give the opposition a free forum?

Every precinct had co-captains who coordinated the targeted voter lists for their precincts and organized phone calls before and on election day. Most of the calling was decentralized. There were polls watchers at some of the polls and a push to get supporters to the polls on the final day.

There was a fundraising committee which managed to raise more than \$20,000, mostly through repeated mailings to identified supporters.

Goodman said businesses were approached and some were helpful, but they weren't a major factor in the campaign.

In the end, both overrides passed with wide margins. From having lost by 16 votes in 1998, the supporters won by 2,500 votes in 1998 (8,003 "yes" to 5,539 "no"). ■

Communications Principles

- ◆ KIS – Keep It Simple
- ◆ Less is better.
- ◆ Repetition is essential.
- ◆ Words are symbols and language is value-laden.
- ◆ Americans are increasingly passive in receiving information.
- ◆ Make information as "visual" as possible.
- ◆ Credibility is critical, not just issue positions.

The overarching theme on message development is: develop a simple, clear message with no more than three or four points; test your message to make sure it resonates with the electorate; repeat your message often – even if you are getting tired of it; stick to your message – even if your opponents want to change the subject to get you off message! ■

venues where supporters are communicating about the override. While no message will appeal to everyone, it is important to remember that only a small percentage of all households in Massachusetts include children attending public school, so there must be messages in the campaign that appeal to the interests of those who do not have children. For example, three messages to use during a debt exclusion campaign could be the following:

- ◆ The school is very old, run-down, expensive to repair and not capable of supporting the technology needs of the students. Building a new school will greatly improve the educational climate.
- ◆ If voters approve the debt exclusion, the state will pick up 70 percent of the cost of rebuilding the school. If the debt exclusion is defeated, that reimbursement may not be available in the future, placing even greater burdens on local taxpayers.
- ◆ Rebuilding the school will raise property values for everyone in the district.

Great care should be taken in developing the message. Even if you do not have the resources to formally test the message on randomly selected voters, try out the message on a variety of likely voters, including some who are undecided or leaning against, to find out which arguments seem to move them the most. This will help you anticipate what the key counter-arguments will be and how to respond to them.

The campaign will need some different materials where your message is repeated. Some campaigns develop fact sheets tailored to particular constituencies, such as the elderly. Minimally, a campaign should develop:

- ◆ A one-page flyer or brochure.
- ◆ A more detailed Q&A, primarily to be given to campaign leaders, phone bankers who will need to answer questions about the issue, elected officials, school officials and news reporters who are seeking more than just the bare facts to cover the issue.
- ◆ “Dear Friend” cards

What about buttons, bumper stickers and signs? If you are running a highly visible campaign, buttons, bumper stickers and signs will probably be part of your visibility effort. If you are running a low-profile campaign, they should be avoided. After all, a sign held on a street corner will inspire as many opponents to vote as supporters – if not more, assuming the opponents are not also doing their own Voter ID campaign.

If your campaign leaders feel they should have a button or bumper sticker, it is better to refer to the goal, not to the override itself. For example, “Rebuild Agawam Schools” is a better bumper sticker than “Support the Override.” ■

Getting Volunteers

Recruiting and retaining volunteers is essential for any effective campaign. The campaign committee should focus a lot of its attention on this effort early on or the handful of activists who launched the campaign will be faced with the impossible task of doing it all. For more tips on this issue, see “How To Recruit, Organize and Manage Volunteers,” NEA Series in Practical Politics.

This guide notes it is important to understand why people volunteer and to establish conditions that meet their goals. One reason to volunteer is **social**: campaign activities can be a fun, collective effort. If your campaign has no laughs, no pizza and no war stories, it may not make it off the ground. Some will volunteer for **variety** from their daily routines. It offers them a change to “get away from it all.” Another reason to volunteer is for a **belief**. Some of the best volunteers are seniors or other community residents who neither work in nor have family members who attend public schools, but they participate because they strongly believe in public education. A fourth reason is **self-interest**. Parents and educators who want better schools for children and better pay and working conditions for

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educators can be convinced to volunteer even if they think they do not have time for it in their busy lives.

Don't waste your volunteers' time. The NEA guide identifies nine things they need to stick with a campaign:

1. A clear, specific, manageable job.
2. A good reason for having to do it.
3. The tools to get it done.
4. Proper training.
5. Written directions.
6. Good working conditions.
7. A deadline.
8. A report to make.
9. Recognition and appreciation.

For a local association, the first, best place to look for volunteers, as well as for favorable votes, is in the mirror.

Member Outreach

The single most important voters for a local association to organize are its own members, whether or not they live in the community, and other MTA members who live there but work in a different district.

Support from these members should not be taken for granted, even if the override funds are specifically targeted to the public schools. Most MTA members, like most people, are not eager to pay more in taxes if they don't have to. Like the general public, they may need to be convinced that the override is absolutely necessary to improve educators' professional lives, as well as improve the quality of education for students.

Here are some suggestions for member outreach.

Hold a general membership meeting to explain the issues and make a strong case for support. It may be helpful to bring in

an outside guest (a parent, a school committee member, etc.) who is very knowledgeable about the issue and passionate about it. Distribute a list at this meeting seeking volunteers. Have them check off specific activities they may be willing to do, such as make phone calls, send "Dear Friend" cards, participate in a literature drop, help set up or maintain a Web site, help design literature.

Develop a flyer or letter targeted to educators that specifically addresses their own interests in the issue. For example, remind them of the link between local tax revenues and a community's ability to finance raises, health insurance, professional development, smaller classes and adequate educational support professionals. Tell them what the negative consequences of failing to pass the override will be - not just for new members (who may be laid off), but also for veteran teachers, who may experience smaller salary increases, which will translate into reduced retirement benefits. Any flyer targeted to educators should also include information on the educational benefits to students. Educators care about these benefits, or they wouldn't have chosen this line of work. In addition, it would not be helpful if the opposition obtained copies of literature that only referenced teachers' economic interests; they might use that literature to falsely claim that the override was simply to benefit "greedy" public employees.

Obtain mailing labels from MTA for all MTA members who live in the community. Your UniServ Representative will know how to obtain such labels. Write a letter to these members appealing for their votes and their support as volunteers. In addition to sending a letter, it is helpful to call MTA members seeking their support. Many of these members also will appear on your list of active voters, so be sure to cross-reference your lists to make sure you are not phoning them multiple times with the same request.

Establish or re-activate your local's Political Action Committee to spearhead the association's involvement in the override.

Use building representatives to reach out to members one-on-one. Override campaigns offer a good opportunity to strengthen your organization by involving new members who may not have been active before. These campaigns also provide educators with a chance to connect with parents and other community members in a positive way. Parents greatly appreciate seeing teachers being active on behalf of local schools. It is also gratifying for teachers to work with, and get to know, parents who are willing to extend themselves for better pay and working conditions for teachers.

Generate enthusiasm for the effort through the association's newsletter and/or Web site. The more your own association members hear about how important this issue is, the more likely they will be to vote in favor and volunteer their time to help.

There is no question that educator involvement in an override campaign can be extremely helpful, but there are questions about how public their role should be. Since associations and educators are directly affected by an override for school funding, they may be accused of acting out of self-interest in the campaign. While there is nothing wrong with self-interest, particularly since funding that benefits educators also benefits students and the community as a whole, some associations believe they can be more effective if they play a behind-the-scenes role in the campaign. This is not a problem since much of the work in a ballot initiative campaign involves phoning, stuffing envelopes, producing literature, distributing literature, communicating with one's own members and other activities performed outside the public eye.

Other association leaders play an active and public role in an override campaign, and this can also be helpful in raising the association's profile and credibility within a community. Either option can work. Doing nothing to support an override for schools is the one option that should be rejected. ■

Community Outreach

Whether you run a high- or low-visibility campaign, you will want to concentrate on getting supporters to the polls through targeting. There is a lot of literature about different ways to target voters (see the bibliography for a few suggestions), but perhaps it is easiest to think about two broad types of targeting: First, to groups or people whose demographic characteristics suggest they are likely to support an override; second, to individuals specifically identified as supportive.

Certain generalizations can be drawn based on polling in Massachusetts and other states on overrides and similar issues.

- ◆ Parents with children in the public schools are the most likely to vote "yes" on a school-related override.
- ◆ Women support overrides at a higher rate than men.
- ◆ Better educated voters support overrides at a higher rate than less educated voters.
- ◆ Younger voters support overrides at a high rate than older voters.

Political consultants say that gender is a greater predictor of support than education level and education level is a greater predictor than age. Not surprisingly, parents of both genders and all education levels are by far the most likely to vote "yes" and to work on behalf of the campaign; therefore, parents should be the main focus of your outreach efforts. Here are some examples of outreach efforts that have proven effective:

- ◆ PTA/PTO Parent teacher organizations and school councils are critically important. Ask the leaders of these organizations for a chance to address parents at a meeting. In addition, ask if they will give you a list of parent members, or do a mailing themselves, to let parents know of

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the override and urge them to support it. (Reminder: No fundraising for any ballot campaigns is permitted in public facilities, including schools).

- ◆ Indoor playgrounds, day care centers, neighborhood art centers, after school programs, Boys & Girls Clubs, sports centers, etc. Think about where children of all ages gather in the community and target literature there. Since today's preschoolers are tomorrow's kindergartners, their parents have as much interest in supporting strong public schools as do parents of school-age children.
- ◆ Coffee klatches. Ask teachers, parents and other community supporters to hold "coffee klatches" in their houses and to invite friends and neighbors they consider likely supporters. Have a representative of the campaign speak about the issue, answer questions and solicit support. (Reminder: Public employees may not solicit donations for a ballot campaign.)
- ◆ "Dear Friend" cards. Everyone who is supporting the campaign should be given at least 10 pre-printed "Dear Friend" postcards asking for a "yes" vote. They should mail these cards to friends and neighbors who they believe are likely to support the override. Better yet, if you have the resources, ask them to return the cards to the campaign headquarters. That way, you can keep tabs on whether the cards are really going out.
- ◆ Web site. A Web site can be very useful in an override effort. Web sites can be developed relatively quickly and inexpensively. Override supporters may seek to hire someone to develop the Web site, but it is also quite possible to find a community resident, a technology teacher or even a politically active student to build and maintain the site. The costs of registering and obtaining a host for the site are minimal. The site can be used to **deliver the message** about why the override is needed; **debunk misinformation** put out by the opposition; **update supporters** about activities, such as an upcoming literature drop or phone bank; **solicit volunteers**; and **identify and build a database of supporters** who can be called and e-mailed reminding them to vote on election day. If you need assistance creating a local Web site to

support the override efforts, ask your UniServ Representative to find out if MTA Communications can help.

- ◆ College students. College students often do not vote in the community where they go to college. High school seniors who have turned 18 also often do not register right away. If they do vote, however, students generally aren't adversely affected by property taxes and are likely to support education. That is why it is important to focus voter registration efforts among college students and high school seniors. The Worcester UniServ consultant reports that a strong effort was made to register college students during that city's 1991 override campaign. Many of the students did register and voted by absentee ballot. The 900 absentee ballots cast in that election were overwhelmingly in favor of the override and played a key role in the final tally: The override won by about 1,800 votes out of 36,000 cast. Thus, college students, even if voting by absentee ballot, can surely make a difference.
- ◆ Realtors. Realtors can be strong supporters of an override vote. Although they are few in number, they often know many people in the community and sometimes contribute money to override campaigns or lend support in other ways, such as making their offices and phones available after hours for phone banking. Realtor support may seem counter-intuitive since a property tax hike makes the cost of housing somewhat more expensive and could theoretically dampen demand for property in a community. In reality, realtors know that the draw of a good school system increases demand for housing to a much greater degree than a small tax hike dampens it. Since one of your messages is likely to be pointing out to voters how an override will increase property values, it is helpful to have the experts – the realtors – saying the same thing.
- ◆ Seniors. The conventional wisdom is that elderly homeowners typically vote against school override campaigns because they live on a fixed

income and do not benefit directly from the school improvements – though their grandchildren might if they live in the same community (which is increasingly rare). In some communities, seniors have been very helpful. They do vote in high numbers whether you have targeted them for support or not, so it is important to make sure they understand two points about an override.

1. Seniors who do not pay property taxes – for example, those in public housing – will not be affected if an override passes. 2. Low-income seniors who do pay property taxes may be shielded from a property tax hike under a new law called the “circuitbreaker” (see appendix). These two facts could help you win support among seniors, but proceed with caution. Know your audience before campaigning actively among seniors and make sure you have the support of respected seniors before trying to win support from this community. Consider reaching out to retired MTA members in the community, possibly sending them a separate mailing targeted to their background in education.

In addition to these constituencies, it is also possible to win support by targeting neighborhoods, often identified by precinct, where support is likely to be strong. The most scientific way to do so is to analyze the voting patterns on similar issues in the recent past. A less scientific approach is to rely on the political savvy of local elected officials and community activists to target streets, neighborhoods and precincts where support is likely to be strong.

Don't overlook the obvious. If the ballot question is a debt exclusion or capital expenditure to improve a school in a particular neighborhood, heavily target the affected area for support. ■

Voter Identification and GOTV

Voter ID refers to the practice of identifying individual supporters. GOTV refers to the effort needed to get those supporters to the polls. This strategy requires organization and volunteers, but is well worth effort. It is probably the single most effective activity override supporters can do. If we learned nothing else from the presidential election in 2000, every vote really does count. Many overrides have won or lost by a handful of votes.

Step One: Voter ID.

◆ Obtain voter lists from recent municipal elections in your community. These generally are available in an electronic database that can be transferred to a standard database of your choosing. These lists will tell you who voted in each election – though obviously not how they voted. Volunteers armed with phone books and the Internet will have to match as many phone numbers as possible with the names of voters who cast ballots in recent municipal elections.

Many more people vote in national elections than in municipal elections – particularly in a presidential election year – so using national election voting records is not very helpful. In addition, avoid using results that go back more than two election cycles since many voters will no longer be living at the same address in our mobile society.

If the results are difficult or costly to obtain (municipalities may charge a reasonable fee if they have to photocopy results), a secondary source is the local newspaper. Check the library for the newspaper archives.

◆ Telephone the voters who cast ballots in the last two municipal elections. If you do not have enough volunteers to call the entire municipality, focus on calling in precincts that are considered

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likely to favor the override (see Community Outreach, above). Always start with those precincts in case you don't make it to the end of the list.

It is great if there is a central location – such as a supporter's office or the local association office – where several callers can work at the same time. This may entail temporarily installing new phones and other office equipment. If this is not possible, precinct captains should keep tabs on volunteers who are making calls from their homes.

Each caller will have a list of phone numbers, a script and additional talking points. Typically, the caller will identify him or herself as calling on behalf of the campaign to seek support for the initiative. The caller will ask respondents if they are registered to vote, if they intend to vote in the upcoming election, and, if the answer to both is "yes," if they intend to vote in favor of the override.

Callers will use the voter list (called a "walking list") to note on a five-point scale if the respondent is supportive, leaning in favor, undecided, leaning against or opposed. Thank the supportive respondents. Some campaigns also use the opportunity to ask if they would like to help with the campaign in any way. Do not turn this into a fundraising call as it may turn off the respondent. If the respondent is leaning in favor or undecided, the caller should give a few key reasons why he or she should vote "yes." Offer to answer any questions and to send them material on the issue. If they are leaning against or are opposed, thank them politely and hang up, making sure to note they should not be called again.

◆ **Scheduling call backs.** In this day of answering machines and busy lives, many voters will not be available on the first try. Make sure to schedule enough time to call back voters who were not available on the first round of calls. Some campaigns also find it useful to call the "undecided" and "leaning in favor" voters a second time – as long as the second call is at least several days after the first one – to offer persuasive arguments in favor of the initiative and to find out if their position has changed.

Step Two: GOTV

◆ **GOTV postcard and phone bank.** Getting your voters out on election day is ultimately the key to success. Resources permitting, it is an excellent idea to send a postcard to definite "yes" voters a couple of days before the election reminding them to vote. In addition, you should place a high priority on setting up phone banks just before election day and on election day itself. Call the definite "yes" voters to remind them to vote. Depending on the circumstances, you may also want to call the voters identified as "leaning yes." Also, if you have not been able to generate strong lists of "yes" voters, call all the voters in precincts which are identified as likely to support the initiative.

Phone lists should be well organized so that voters are not being called twice. It is OK to leave a message on the answering machine to remind supporters to vote, though it is better to speak to them in person. Make sure there are sufficient volunteers at the end of the day to coordinate with your poll watchers, if you have them.

◆ **Poll watchers.** Poll watchers are a good idea if you have the bodies needed to perform this function. The campaign must contact the local election department before election day to find out the local process for poll watching and obtain the required forms. It is ideal to have poll watchers in every precinct, and poll watching should be overseen by precinct captains. If that is not possible, do the best you can. Locate poll watchers in precincts that

are likely to yield a lot of favorable voters. Poll watchers must work in shifts since they have to be at the polls all day for the system to work. Each poll watcher will need a list of voters who have been identified as supportive. This list should be in alphabetical order and by precinct. Phone bankers must have a copy of the lists organized in the same way.

Poll watchers sit next to the election workers and mark the names of everyone who comes in to vote. About four hours before the polls close, poll watchers relay information back to the phone banks identifying the names and precincts of the supportive voters who have not yet voted. The phone bank callers will then have an important list of voters to target. Offer elderly or disabled supporters a ride to the polls, if possible.

If there are not enough volunteers to watch the polls, it is still essential to make GOTV calls on election day by running through the list of identified supporters and reminding them to vote.

After the Election

Win or lose, it is important to thank your supporters. Some campaigns choose to hold a party on election night to await results and celebrate the victory. Supporters should be thanked at this event. In addition, the ballot committee should send a “thank you” letter or postcard to donors and volunteers. Some local newspapers also will publish “thank you” letters to the voters. (An added bonus: If the campaign has run up a debt, gestures of appreciation make post-campaign fundraising a little easier.)

Within a few days after the election, campaign leaders should reconvene to assess what worked and what didn't. This committee should keep records of all the activities during the campaign, along with copies of flyers, scripts, precinct analyses, names of activists and supportive organizations and other relevant information. Whether or not the effort was successful, notes from the post-election evaluation will prove to be very useful if the need should arise again in the future for another Proposition 2 ½ override.

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