

# The MORRIS LEATHERMAN Company

## WORTHINGTON SCHOOL DISTRICT RESIDENTIAL SURVEY

### 2017 POST-REFERENDUM STUDY

#### *Findings and Implications*

##### ***Residential Demographics:***

The typical Worthington School District resident lived there for 18.1 years. Twenty-seven percent resided there for ten years or less, while 23% lived there for over 30 years. The median age of adult residents is 49.7 years old. Twenty percent are under 35 years old; forty percent are 55 years old and older. The typical resident has some post-secondary experience, though short of graduation. Thirty-two percent report high school graduation or less. Twenty-five percent have post-secondary educational experience, and 42% are college graduates or post-graduates. Women outnumber men in the School District by two percent.

Twenty-eight percent of the School District's households contain Worthington Public School students; seven percent use non-public alternatives, home school or open enrollment. Sixty-six percent report no school-aged children at home. Fifteen percent of the households report the presence of an infant or pre-schooler. Seventy-two percent classify themselves as "White," while 12% call themselves "Hispanic-Latino," seven percent are "Asian-Pacific Islander," and six percent classify as "African-American."

Twenty-seven percent rent their current residence. The median value of owner-occupied housing is \$158,000.00. Forty percent report they are fiscally stressed – either their monthly expenses exceed current income or monthly expenses are met but little or no savings are put aside. Sixty percent report no fiscal stress – either managing comfortably and putting some money aside or managing very well. Seventy-two percent live in the City of Worthington, 11% reside in another town, 13% live in rural non-farm areas, and five percent reside on farms.

##### ***Meeting Student Needs:***

Eighty-seven percent of the sample thinks the Worthington Schools meet the learning needs of either "all" or "most" students. Only eight percent think the schools meet the needs of "only some" or "very few." There is no consensus about the principal type of student whose needs are unmet.

***Perceptions of the Worthington School District:***

Eighty-seven percent rate the quality of education provided by the Worthington Public Schools as either “excellent” or “good.” In fact, 24% rate the quality as “excellent.” Only 11% are more critical in their evaluations, and three percent are “unsure.”

“Good teachers,” at 25%, is the aspect of the School District liked most by residents. Twenty-two percent point to “variety and depth of programs,” while seven percent place their highest value on the School District’s “good communications.” Five percent cite “achievement statistics.” Fifteen percent view “poor spending” as the most serious problems facing the Worthington Schools. Ten percent each cite “large class sizes” or “bullying.” Nine percent point to the “need for more space,” while eight percent cite the “lack of funding.” “High taxes” and “drugs” follow at five percent each. “Poor past spending” and “outdated facilities” are each raised by nine percent. Seven percent talk about “lack of discipline,” while six percent cites “high taxes.” Only six percent report there are “no serious issues” facing the School District. This last group of “boosters” is at the statewide norm.

A majority of 54%-40% agree that “when the Worthington Schools ask voters to approve a property tax increase, it is only after the Administration and School Board have considered all other budget alternatives.” A similar 57%-37% majority agree that “during the last couple of years, the Worthington School District Administration and Board have spent tax money effectively and efficiently.” In the same vein, a 54%-40% majority agrees that “the Worthington School District Board and Administration have spent past bond referendum and operating levy referendum funds responsibly.” On these three key measures of fiscal credibility, the Worthington School District is above the 50% threshold indicating fiscal responsibility, but also has accompanying higher than normal negative ratings.

A solid 80% believe “our community receives a good value from its investment in local public schools,” while 17% disagree. More importantly, though, by a lower 57%-35% margin, residents believe “the Worthington Schools are a good investment and [they] would support a referendum to protect that investment.”

Finally, the inclusiveness of the School District is assessed in the statement: “The Worthington School District Board and Administration do a good job of involving community leaders, parents, and interested citizens in decisions about the schools.” A super-majority of 76% agrees with this statement, while 23% disagrees.

Thirty-five percent of the sample reports household members used Community Education programs offered by the School District during the past year. An additional 18% are past, but not current program users, bringing the reach across the school district to 53% of all households.

### ***Tax Climate:***

The tax climate in the School District is borderline **hostile**. In comparison with neighboring areas, 51% think of their total property taxes as “high,” and 42% see them as “about average.” Focusing on school district taxes, 46% think they are comparatively “high,” while 47% see them as “about average.”

Fifty-one percent rate the financial management of the Worthington Public Schools as either “excellent” or “good.” But, 43% see it as “only fair” or “poor,” with an unusually high Of 20% in the latter category.

### ***The November 2016 Bond Referendum Election:***

Typical of a presidential year election in Minnesota, a very high 75% remember voting in the last bond referendum. Non-voters posted five main reasons for not participating: “forgot,” at 23%; “not aware” or “out of town/on vacation,” each at 18%; “too busy to vote,” at 15%; and, “no interest,” at 10%.

Voters in the election significantly opposed the ballot question, by a 64%-36% majority. Opponents cited three major reasons for their position on the bond referendum: “poor School District spending,” at 39%; and, “taxes are too high” or “cost was too high,” each at 25%.

Sixty-four percent report hearing from no organized group either in favor of or opposed to the bond referendum. But, 25% heard from both types of groups, while five percent each heard from only supporters or opponents.

Sixty percent have no suggestions for the School District in better improving their information about the referendum proposal. Nineteen percent want “more budget detail,” thirteen percent need “more information about the uses for the funds,” and nine percent want “more information about the need for these funds.”

Forty-five percent report their mind was made up on their votes when the referendum was initially announced. Fifteen percent knew their vote before Labor Day, fourteen percent report they made up their mind during September, and only sixteen percent were undecided come October.

### ***Referendum Predisposition:***

The Worthington School District is one of the very few districts enjoying an almost even split “quick difference” on an announced referendum. Twenty-one percent report they “would vote for nearly any proposal to increase property taxes for education,” while 23% “would vote against almost any proposal to increase local property taxes for education.” The “quick difference” between this “core support” and “core opposition” is -2%. What this means is upon hearing of a School District referendum election, opponents initially outnumber supporters by two percent; there is little lost ground to make up in the election campaign. A favorable split among residents who “would vote for a tax increase under some conditions, but against it under other conditions” of 60%-40% will guarantee success at the polls.

**Specific Bond Referendum Proposals:**

Residents were asked about their reaction to a bond referendum proposal. Without knowledge of the specific components in the proposal, the typical resident indicates a willingness to increase their taxes by \$7.50 per month. But, 28% are unwilling to increase their property taxes at all for this purpose.

Next, residents were asked about their support of or opposition to a property tax increase for seven different components to address classroom space and facilities needs. The table below arrays each proposal with the percent of the sample in support and the percent in opposition to that new facility or improvement.

<b>Component</b>	<b>Support</b>	<b>Opposition</b>
Construction of a new Grade 9 to 12 high school on District-owned land south of the existing middle school site	42%	53%
Converting Prairie Elementary to a Pre-K to second grade and Community Education facility; the current Middle School to a Grade 3 to 5 Intermediate School and the current High School to a Grade 6 though 8 Middle School	52%	44%
Construction of a multi-purpose stadium and athletic fields at the new high school site	35%	60%
Construction of a new Alternative Learning Center or ALC facility on the new high school site	47%	49%
Safety and security improvements and enhancements at all district schools	77%	22%
Upgrading and updating technology infrastructure, such as routers and servers in all district schools	64%	34%
Construction of space for Community Education programming	54%	40%

Of the seven proposals, only two receive solid majority support: “safety and security improvements and enhancements at all district schools” and “upgrading and updating technology infrastructure, such as routers and servers in all district schools.” Two proposals are given marginal approval: “converting Prairie Elementary to a Pre-K to second grade school and Community Education facility; the current Middle School to a Grade 3 to 5 Intermediate school and the Current High School to a grade 6 though 8 Middle School” and “construction of a space for Community Education programming.” Three proposals already register majorities or high pluralities in opposition: “construction of a new Grade 9 to 12 high school on District-owned land south of the existing middle school,” “construction of a multi-purpose stadium and athletic fields at the new high school site,” and “construction of a new Alternative Learning Center or ALC facility on the new high school site.”

In assessing all components together, 64% think they sound like a “good idea,” while 30% view them as a “bad idea.” Among those thinking they are a “bad idea,” 39% point to the “new high school,” 20% focus on the “stadium and athletic fields,” 16% cite the “ALC,” and 10% dislike the “Community Education space.”

**Sources of Information:**

The most often-cited principal source of information is the “local newspaper,” at 29%. Sixteen percent point to the “School District website,” and 14% indicate “word-of-mouth.” Twelve percent consider the “District Newsletter” as their principal source of information, and nine percent cite “staff or teachers.”

Not surprisingly, the most effective ways to receive information about Worthington Public Schools are the “mailed District newsletter,” cited by 36%, and the “local newspaper,” at 21%. Fifteen percent point to the “School District website,” while 13% point to “e-mail.”

Sixty-seven percent are “satisfied” with the amount of information they receive from the Worthington Schools. Twenty-two percent report they are “not satisfied, because they receive too little information about issues they are most concerned about,” and seven percent are “not satisfied, because they receive too much information about issues they are not concerned about.”

Sixty-four percent report satisfaction with the number of opportunities available to District residents to provide input to the School Board and Administration. Eleven percent want “more opportunities,” ten percent would like to see “more open meetings and seven percent want decision-makers to “listen.”

Respondents were next asked about potential sources of information about the Worthington Public Schools. The table below arrays each possible information source with its “impact” – the percentage of respondents who obtain “a lot” of information from it – and its “reach” – the percentage of respondents who obtain “a lot” or “some” information from it.

<b>Potential Information Source</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Reach</b>
The “Daily Globe” newspaper	37%	69%
Informal discussions with neighbors or acquaintances	32%	67%
The School District website	23%	37%
The School District social media sources, such as Facebook and Twitter	10%	24%
School District employees	9%	27%

The two most impactful and highest reach sources of information about the Worthington Public Schools are the local newspaper and the “grapevine.” The School District-related sources of information have much lower impact and reach. As a result, the School District has little power to set either the policy-making agenda or even substantiate its actions without depending on secondary intermediating adjustments.

**Referendum Strategy and Implications:**

At this time, there is no natural coalition for the passage of a bond to construct a new high school. In addition, there also appears to be significant opposition to the school building conversions and the new

athletic facilities. These new, more hostile dynamics are due to the solid majority defeat of the 2016 November bond referendum election, which also raised questions about the School District's financial management and past spending policies, and the ability of opponents to drive the campaign's dialogue and focus.

There are three prevalent attitudes about any coming referendum in 2017:

1. Likely voters would support a bond referendum raising annual property taxes between \$84.00 and \$100.00 on the median valued home.
2. Likely voters are more apt to support addressing space needs through additions or renovations at current buildings. Similarly, they are supportive of enhancing the technology infrastructure and improving safety and security at all sites.
3. Any referendum effort will require much more aggressive information and grassroots campaigns. In particular, the need for any building upgrades will need to be established; any building changes will need to be explicitly linked to student achievement; cost-effectiveness will need to be shown in some detail; and, turnout levels among supportive groups will need to be raised across-the-board.

The expected turnout in an off-year bond referendum election in 2017 is 34% of the eligible electorate. These voters opposed the 2016 proposal by a 74%-26% margin. They oppose the construction of a new high school by a 67%-26% margin. They also oppose the conversion of current facilities to allow for new grade configurations by a 59%-39% margin. And, likely voters split by a 76%-22% majority against the construction of a multi-purpose stadium and athletics fields at the new high school site. In essence, the new high school proposal has become toxic.

Even current parents of Worthington Public School children do not provide the margins needed to overcome the motivated opposition. By a 65%-25% margin they support a new high school, but their projected turnout levels are lower than the overall 34% voting level. And, while they are again supportive of the conversion of current facilities to new grade levels, by a 76%-20% majority, low turnout projections dull their impact on a special bond referendum election.

To move beyond these tight constraints on the feasibility of a referendum proposal, the School District should explore new and innovative means of reaching the public with precise information. While tax costs are a major concern, the thrust of the 2016 referendum – new facilities and conversions of current buildings – was not clearly established in voter's minds. This informative approach will require both "wholesale" methods – social media and mailings – as well as "retail methods" – guerrilla marketing, newspaper ads and endorsements, video, and targeted television and radio messages.

***Methodology:***

This study contains the results of a sample of 400 randomly selected adult residents residing in the Worthington School District. Professional interviewers conducted the survey by telephone between February 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The typical respondent took

18 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The results of the study are projectable to all adult Worthington School District residents within  $\pm 5.0\%$  in 95 out of 100 cases.