

The MORRIS LEATHERMAN Company

MOORHEAD AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT RESIDENTIAL SURVEY

PRE-REFERENDUM STUDY

Findings and Implications

Residential Demographics:

The typical Moorhead Area School District resident lived there for 20.2 years. Twenty-eight percent resided there for ten years or less, while 28% lived there for over 30 years. The median age of adult residents is 49.0 years old. Nineteen percent are under 35 years old; nineteen percent are 65 years old and older. The typical resident has some post-secondary experience, though short of college graduation. Twenty-two percent report high school graduation or less. Thirty-two percent have post-secondary educational experience, and 43% are college graduates or post-graduates. Women outnumber men in the School District by two percent. Thirty-nine percent are most closely aligned with the DFL, 31%, with the Republican Party, and 19% are political Independents.

Thirty percent of the School District's households contain Moorhead Area Public School students; four percent use non-public alternatives or open enrollment. Sixty-eight percent report no school-aged children at home; within this group, 51% had children attending the Moorhead Area Public Schools in the past. Twelve percent of the households report the presence of an infant or preschooler.

Twenty-nine percent rent their current residence. The median value of owner-occupied housing is \$170,000.00. Forty-two 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. Fifty-seven percent report no fiscal stress – either managing comfortably and putting some money aside or managing very well. Forty percent live north of I-94 and south of Main Street, 31% reside south of I-94, and 29% live north of Main Street.

Perceptions of the Moorhead Area Public Schools:

Ninety percent rate the quality of education provided by the Moorhead Area Public Schools as either “excellent” or “good.” In fact, 29% rate the quality as “excellent.” Only eight percent are more critical in their evaluations, and two percent are “unsure.” This rating places the quality of education within the top quartile of Minnesota Public School Districts.

A convincing majority of 71%-24% agree that “when the Moorhead Area Public Schools ask voters to approve a referendum, it is only as a last resort, after the Administration and School Board have

considered all other budget alternatives.” An identical 74%-24% agree “during the last couple of years, the Moorhead Area Public School District Administration and Board have spent tax money effectively and efficiently.” And, by a 67%-27% margin, residents think “the 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 Moorhead Area Public School District is well above the 50% threshold indicating fiscal responsibility.

A solid 89% believe “our community receives a good value from its investment in local public schools,” while only nine percent disagree. And, the similar solid majority, 88%-10% states “I trust the Moorhead Area Public Schools Board and Administration to do what is right for children in this district.” Eighty-seven percent believe “the Moorhead Area Public School District is held accountable enough for the quality of education provided to their students.” Eighty-four percent agree “the Moorhead Area Public Schools Board and Administration do a good job of involving community leaders, parents, and interested citizens in decisions about the schools.” Most importantly, though, by a 65%-28% margin, residents believe “the Moorhead Area Public Schools are a good investment and [they] would support a referendum to protect that investment.”

Thirty-eight percent of the sample report household members used Community Education programs offered by the School District; another 36% of current non-participants report using offerings not as recently as within the past year. The total percentage of households who have participated in Community Education services is 70%.

School District Job Performance Ratings:

Sixty-one percent report they follow the work of the School Board and Administration in the Moorhead Area Public Schools either “very closely” or “somewhat closely.” Thirty-nine percent, though, indicate they follow “not very closely” or “not at all closely.”

A very high 77% rate the job performance of the Moorhead Area School Board as either “excellent” or “good.” Eighteen percent, however, rate it as “only fair” or “poor.” The remaining five percent are “unsure.” A similarly high 77% rate the job performance of the District’s Administration including the Superintendent favorably, while 17% are more critical. This time, six percent are “uncertain.” In both cases these ratings are among the top decile across the State of Minnesota.

Eighty-six percent rate the District’s Principals as either “excellent” or “good,” while an 11% are more critical, and four percent are “unsure.” Ninety-three percent rate the job performance of teachers and instruction staff as either “excellent” or “good.” Five percent see them as “only fair” or “poor,” and two percent are “unsure.” This evaluation ranks among the highest decile of districts in the State of Minnesota.

Tax Climate:

The tax climate in the School District is generally moderately hostile. In comparison with neighboring areas, 55% think their total property taxes as “high,” and 39% see them as “about average.” Focusing on school district taxes, again, 55% think they are comparatively “high,” while 39% see them as “about average.” In any referendum election, the School District will need to establish a clear need for additional funding at the current time.

Referendum Predisposition:

The Moorhead Area Public School District starts referendum campaigns at a moderate disadvantage. Sixteen percent report they “would vote for almost any tax increases for the schools,” while 22% “would vote against almost any tax increases for the schools.” The “quick difference” between this “core support” and “core opposition” is -6%. What this means is upon hearing of a School District referendum election, opponents initially outnumber supporters by six percent. A favorable split among residents who “would vote for a tax increase under some conditions, but against it under other conditions,” a 60% majority, is needed to guarantee success at the polls.

Specific Bond Referendum Proposals:

Respondents were advised that for the 2015-16 school year, public schools will have a grade configuration of a Kindergarten Center, first through fifth grades in the elementary schools, sixth through eighth grade in the middle schools, and ninth through twelfth grade in the high school. Residents split 45%-37% against the new grade configuration. Opponents see “no reason to change” or “waste of tax money.” Supporters think the new grade configurations provide “appropriate grade groupings” and “creation of more space in the schools.” Among current parents, the margin is reversed to a 51%-35% majority.

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 \$5.04 per month, or \$60.48 per year. But, a significant 33% 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 specific ways to address classroom space and facilities needs. The table below lists the proposed options, followed by its support and its opposition levels.

<i>Option</i>	<i>Support</i>	<i>Oppose</i>
Safety and security improvements at all district schools	69%	31%
Construction of a performing arts center at Horizon Middle School	56%	42%

<i>Option</i>	<i>Support</i>	<i>Oppose</i>
Construction of a school addition for 5 th and 6 th grade at Horizon Middle School	55%	43%
Construction of a new elementary school for Kindergarten through fourth grade students	47%	52%

Only one of the proposals – construction of a new elementary school – falls below the 50% support mark. The other three proposals reflect good majority support and at least a 12% margin over opposition.

By a 58%-38% majority, residents think the improvements sound like a “good idea.” Among the minority who are more critical, 42% report they would not vote for a “new elementary school,” 12% against a proposal containing a “performing arts center,” and 11% would not vote for a proposal containing a “middle school additions for fifth and sixth grades.

While 34% think the cost of 78 million dollars is “a fair price,” 54% think it is “not a fair price,” and 13% are “unsure.” Since there seems to be “sticker shock,” the information campaign should center on the property tax increase for an individual household, and spend little time on the total price tag.

\$78,000,000 Bond Referendum:

When told about the property tax impact of the passage of the \$78,000,000 bond referendum, residents split 56%-33% in favor of the package. In fact, 14% “strongly support” its passage, while only 16% “strongly oppose” it, a relative parity of intense feelings. Supporters base their decision on “importance of education,” “needed,” and “reasonable cost.” Opponents point to “taxes already too high,” “too high cost,” “no need,” and “past poor District spending.” Among likely voters, 24% of registered voters, the margin in favor of the proposal is 67%-30%.

Among all voters, demographic groups posting support levels significantly higher than 56% include: Residents for less than 20 years, Community Education program users, residents under the age of 45 years old, households containing current Moorhead Area Public School students, renters, owners of less than \$200,000 homes, Democrats, residents of areas south of I-94, and women. The key strategy for the passage of the referendum is to concentrate on motivating these groups to turn out in November.

High School Space Options:

Respondents were told that in the future the School District will have to consider options for classroom space at Moorhead High School. Two options were mentioned: the construction of a new high school and repurposing the existing facility for District and community use or building an addition onto the existing high school building. No consensus emerges: twenty-five percent want to build a new high

school, 35% prefer classroom additions to the existing building, and 31% do not support either option. Only nine percent were undecided.

Interviewees supporting classroom additions base their decision on “additions are cheaper,” at 37%, or “facility is still usable,” at 20%. Respondents supporting a new building cite “building new provides more space for future needs,” at 23%, or “building new provides modern and updated spaces,” at 13%.

Sources of Information:

A 64% majority thinks they are “very informed” or “somewhat informed” about decisions made by the School Board and Administration. Thirty-six percent feel “not too informed” or “not at all informed.” The level of information is 14% above the statewide norm.

The most often-cited credible sources of information are the “School District newsletter,” at 29%, and “local newspapers,” at 26%. Twelve percent each point to the “School District website” or “teachers and staff,” while 10% indicates “e-mail.” Only five percent consider the “grapevine” as their most credible source of information.

Not surprisingly, the most effective ways to receive information about Moorhead Area Public Schools are the “mailed newsletter,” posted by 30%, the “e-mail,” cited by 23%, or the “local newspaper,” at 22%. Nine percent also point to the “School District website.” Four communications channels reach 84% of the School District’s households.

Next, residents were asked about nine potential sources of information about the Moorhead Area Public Schools. The table below lists the source of information followed by the percentage that rely upon it “a lot” – also called the “impact” – and the percentage who use it for “some information.” The combined percentage of these two results in the “reach” of that source.

<i>Source of Information</i>	<i>“A Lot”</i>	<i>“Some”</i>
Friends and neighbors	30%	49%
“The Forum” newspaper	42%	33%
School District publications, such as the District Calendar, Community Education Catalog and Accountability Report	29%	44%
Moorhead Area Public School teachers and staff	26%	36%
The Moorhead Area Public Schools website	32%	23%
Local television or radio	14%	35%
School announcements via e-mail	16%	35%
PowerSchool Parent Portal	13%	27%
School District social media, such as Facebook and Twitter	6%	25%

The “grapevine” is one of the most dominant sources of information in the School District. “The Forum Newspaper” and “School District publications” rank on a par with this more informal means of communications. A grassroots information campaign should incorporate a “Letters to the Editor”

strategy: weekly positive letters and two letters in response to any negative letters. The School District should also consider the use of paid advertising about key facts about the referendum, in addition to the District publications.

Summary and Conclusions:

The Moorhead Area School District is a mature community that is supportive of its public schools. The fiscal credibility of the School District is comparatively high, trust levels are solid, and job ratings are uniformly strong.

The survey demonstrates support for a 78 million dollar bond referendum. Among likely special election voters, the bond referendum proposal passes by a 67%-30% margin, with three percent undecided. With an active grassroots campaign effort advocating for its passage and a thorough information effort conducted by the School District, a solid majority in support of this proposal can be expected on Election Day. At this time, there are two potentially troubling developments: a lower than 24% turnout asymmetrically impacting supportive voters while leaving opposition voters at current levels of participation.

Communications efforts within the District are very successful. A nearly two-thirds majority feels informed about decisions made by the School Board and Administration. In fact, three sources of information are relied upon by 75% of the households: “The Fargo Forum,” “mailed School District newsletters,” and “e-mail.” The only troublesome part of the communications network is the unusually large dependence on the “grapevine.” In any communications effort, the School District will need to consider so-called “guerrilla marketing” techniques to tap into this informal channel of communications.

The Moorhead Area Public Schools has built a remarkable reservoir of goodwill among its residents. It is not only deep but very broad – spanning age, household types, and education level. This pool of residents will not only serve the District well in the near term, in a coming referendum election, but will also help in the navigation of any key issues in the long run.

Methodology:

This study contains the results of a sample of 400 randomly selected adult residents residing in the Moorhead Area School District. Professional interviewers conducted the survey by telephone between April 13th and 23rd, 2015. The typical respondent took 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The results of the study are projectable to all adult Moorhead Area School District residents within ± 5.0 % in 95 out of 100 cases.