

March 2011  
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## Student Response Devices in Wayzata are answering the challenge of modern education

### AMSD Calendar

**March 4, 2011**  
**Board of Directors Meeting**, 7:00 a.m., TIES Building, St. Paul

**March 14, 2011**  
**AMSD & LAC Day at the Capitol**, 9 a.m.-12 p.m., Capitol Room 15

**March 25, 2011**  
**Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting**, 7:30 a.m., TIES Building, St. Paul

**April 8, 2011**  
**Board of Directors Meeting**, 7:00 a.m., TIES Building, St. Paul

**April 15, 2011**  
**Legislative Committee Meeting**, 7:30 a.m., TIES Building, St. Paul

### AMSD's Mission

*To advocate for state education policy that enables metropolitan school districts to improve student learning.*



Association of  
Metropolitan School Districts

**A**n nervous voice quietly utters the incorrect answer to the teacher's question as a wave of laughter erupts around the classroom.

The embarrassment, and even the wrong answer are no longer part of the equation in classrooms with Turning Technologies latest contribution to education in Wayzata Public Schools.

On the student side of the device, the Student Response Device (SRD) or "clicker" as it is commonly referred to, allows for anonymity among students when answering questions in the classroom, which guarantees every student will answer and participate, right or wrong. The SRDs also provide the opportunity for peer review.



Students at Gleason Lake Elementary School in Sara Eickhoff's fourth grade class use their Student Response Devices to participate in a math exercise in fractions.

*Continued on page 2*

### From the Chair:

**O**nce again legislators are making a lot of noise about repealing mandates and enhancing local control. This has become a regular ritual at the Capitol over the past decade. The unfortunate reality, however, has been that very little progress has been made over the past several years in reducing burdensome mandates and restoring local control.

Almost every legislator seems to support local control in theory. During campaign season, legislative candidates routinely espouse their belief in local control. But something seems to happen on the way from the campaign trail to the State Capitol. Once bills are actually introduced to repeal mandates and restore the decision-making ability of locally elected officials, support seems to evaporate.

Given the dire budget situation, mandate relief would be particularly helpful this session. School board and administrators are going to need maximum flexibility the next couple of years to help balance their budgets in a manner that protects the core education programming to the greatest extent possible. Here's hoping that the action matches the rhetoric this session when it comes to mandate relief and local control.

*Patsy Green, school board member from Robbinsdale Area Schools, is chair of AMSD.*

## SRDs proving to be a powerful tool to help students learn and educators teach

*Continued from page 1*

Wayzata Public Schools technology integration specialist Belinda Hartzler gave an example of students in a class voting on a fellow student's paper to determine if the correct approach was taken. Students can take this feedback and make the appropriate changes for the final version of their paper. In this example, active learning among students pairs with peer review to teach all of the students valuable information.

On the teaching side of the equation this device allows instructors to accurately measure responses from every student in the class in order to determine if the class is ready to move to the next subject. Sara Eickhoff, a fourth grade teacher at Gleason Lake Elementary School, said if she sees that 80 to 90 percent of the class understand the material after administering a quiz with the SRD, she can move on.

However, if the students aren't understanding the concept, she can look at the percentages based on what the students are having trouble with and split the class into individual or small groups to address their specific needs. The class can then move on in the same session, compared to a traditional classroom model in which a teacher wouldn't have the results until the next day when another concept needs to be taught.

"Absolutely! I love it," said Eickhoff about using the SRDs in her classroom. She said it has resulted in less paper and pencil assessment for her students, not as much time grading for her and instant results to determine what her students' instructional needs are and the time to meet those needs.

Hartzler said the SRD is another powerful tool helping students to learn and educators to teach. Using this technology to determine if students are ready to move forward is being referred to as agile teaching. Hartzler said this has been a very valuable technique because it allows teachers to know if students are stuck without facing embarrassment and to address the problem quickly before it carries over into another lesson. "It's still about the effective teacher," added Hartzler, meaning the tool just helps the teacher be effective but more quickly than traditional methods.

The use of SRDs takes some of the workload away from the teachers, freeing them up to spend more time helping students understand concepts. The SRD automatically records student responses and the software grades tests and enters the results in the district's data warehouse where it is used to track student progress and improve instruction.

More time teaching and active learning among students are great benefits from a tool that only costs approximately \$35 per unit. Hartzler said Wayzata Public Schools will be adopting a user-owned model for the technology when it is launched district-wide. Currently, the technology is being used in all of the district's buildings and across the curriculum, but beginning next year, the devices will roll out to all students in grades three through 12 with each student keeping their device throughout the year and using it in almost all classes.

District teachers are finding innovative ways to use the technology and SRDs are being employed in art, music and physical education classes in addition to the more obvious settings for this technology like math and science classrooms.

The devices will be owned by students but paid for and maintained by the district for a three-year term. The district has committed to using this technology for three years and will then examine the results as well as the marketplace to see what tools may exist at that time.

*This month's member spotlight was submitted by John Sucansky, Communications Specialist, Wayzata Public Schools.*



Questions for the class are posed on the Smartboard and students enter their responses on the SRDs. Results from the questions are posted immediately following each problem for the class to discuss.

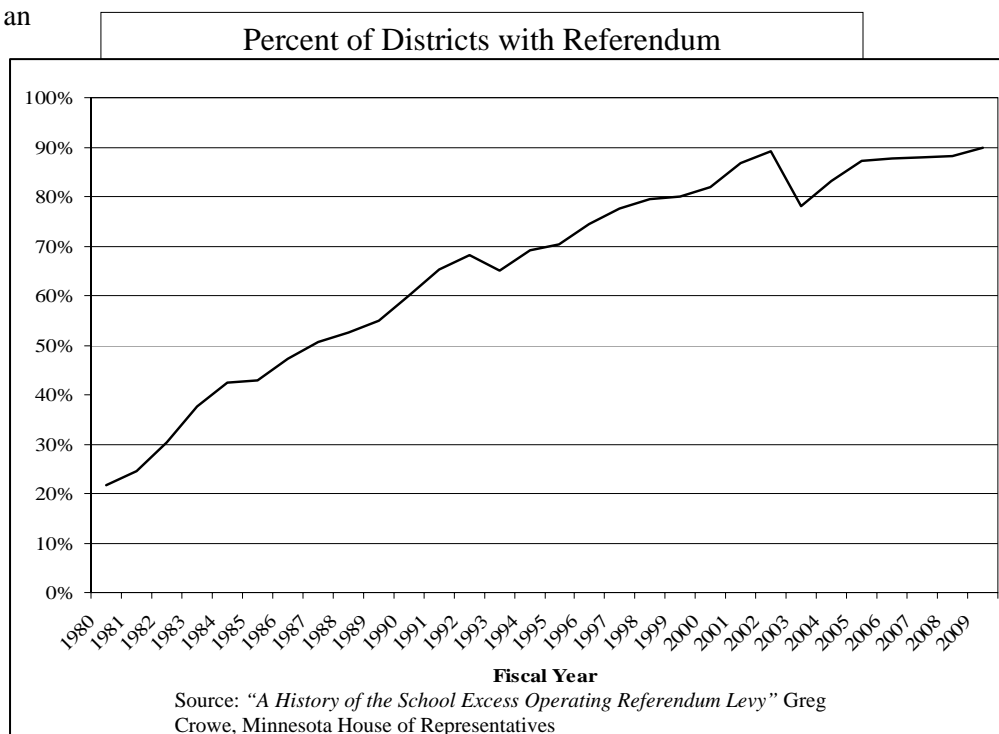
## Stabilizing Education Funding by Reforming the Operating Referendum Law

Since 1971, the state has exerted control over how much local school districts can levy for district operations costs. This state regulation was born out of the “Minnesota Miracle”, a major revamp of the state’s education funding system. This marked the first time the state intervened on the local authority to levy.<sup>1</sup> By today’s standards, the 1971 regulations were relatively modest, allowing levy authority for any amount approved by the voters and without a time limit on the duration of the referendum. In fact, the duration of a referendum was not limited until 1991. Prior to 1991, once a referendum was approved by the voters, it was in effect indefinitely as determined by the school board.

Today, operating levy referendums are highly controlled by the state. In addition to regulating the amount a district can levy, the term of a referendum can last no longer than 10 years and then has to be re-approved by the voters. In addition, with a few exceptions, a referendum must be held on Election Day. Despite the highly regulated environment, school districts have come to rely heavily on revenue received through the operating referendum. From 1980 forward, with few exceptions, revenue raised through voter-approved referendum has increased each year and the percentage of districts with voter approved levies also increased, rising to 90% of all districts for fiscal year 2012.<sup>2</sup>

Not only has the number of districts with an operating levy steadily increased over the last forty years, the percentage of referendum revenue as a component of education funding has also grown from 2.6% in 1984 to 7.4% in 2011. In fact, some school districts rely on the operating referendum for more than 20 percent of their general fund revenue! The growth in referendum revenue has accelerated tremendously over the last decade. Statewide, referendum revenue has grown – from \$292 million in FY 2003 to \$804 million in FY 2011.

While referendum revenue has become a critical component of school funding, referendum elections are fraught with challenges and are subject to the vagaries of the political and economic climate. School districts are the only level of government that is forced to rely on voter-approved referendums for operating revenue. This results in a very unstable climate and makes it extremely challenging for school districts to engage in long-range planning. In addition, referendum elections are costly, both financially and in terms of the time and energy school administrators, board members and parents must spend on them.



Continued on page 4

<sup>1</sup>Greg Crowe, “A History of the School Excess Operating Referendum Levy,” *Money Matters: 08.05* (June 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Tom Melcher, “E-12 Education Finance Update,” *Minnesota Superintendent Conference* (August 2010).

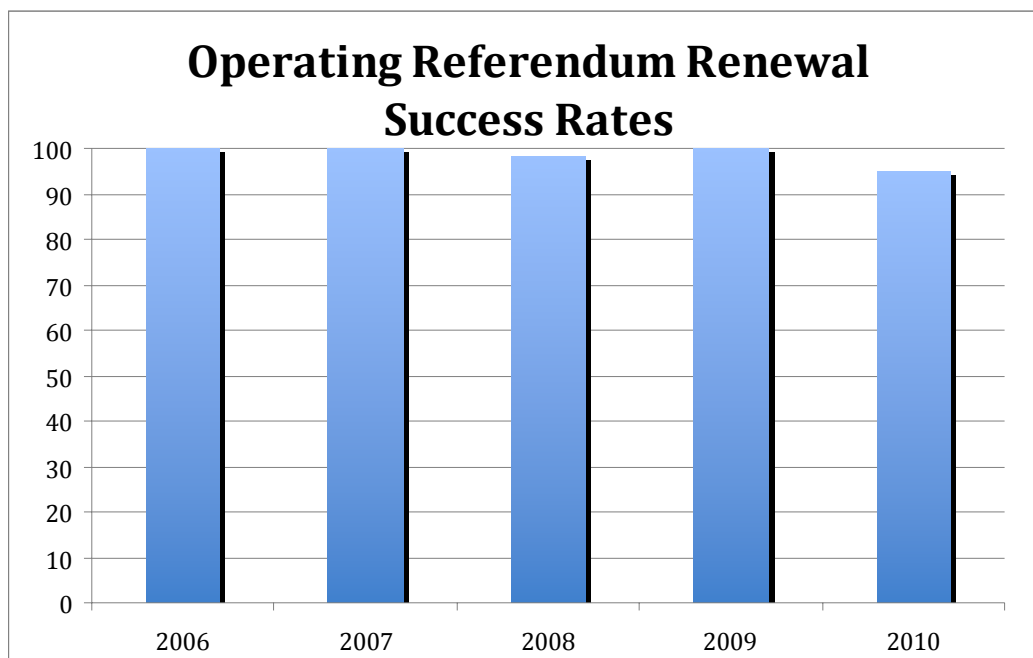
**AMSD Members:** Anoka-Hennepin, Bloomington, Brooklyn Center, Burnsville, Columbia Heights, East Metro Integration District 6067, Eden Prairie, Edina, Elk River, Fridley, Hopkins, Intermediate District 287, Intermediate District 917 (Associate Member), Inver Grove Heights, Mahtomedi, Minneapolis, MSU Mankato Center for Engaged Leadership (Associate Member), Minnetonka, Mounds View, Intermediate School North St. Paul/Maplewood/Oakdale, Northeast Metro District 916 (Associate Member), Northwest Suburban Integration District (Associate Member), Orono, Osseo Area Schools, Richfield, Robbinsdale, Roseville, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan, Shakopee, South St. Paul, Spring Lake Park, St. Anthony/New Brighton, St. Cloud, St. Louis Park, St. Paul, Stillwater, TIES (Associate Member), Wayzata, West Metro Education Program, West St. Paul, and White Bear Lake.

## **Allow school boards to renew operating referendums**

*Continued from page 3*

While the overall passage rate of school referendum questions varies greatly from year to year, the success rate for referendum renewals has been near perfect over the past five years. Because state law places a 10-year limit on the duration of a referendum, a school district is required to conduct a new election when a referendum expires -- even if the referendum is for the same amount and will not result in a property tax increase.

According to data from the Minnesota Department of Education, virtually all referendum renewal questions over the past five years have been successful. As the chart below shows, the last five year's success rates were 100% in 2006, 2007 and 2009, 98.3% in 2008 and 95% in 2010. The 2010 number is deceptively low as District #93 failed in its initial renewal attempt but passed it later that same year. According to the Department of Education, 70 districts will have all or part of their referendum authority expiring next year (phase-outs between fiscal years 2012-2013) and 44 districts have expiring authority in 2012 (phase-outs between 2013-2014). The expiring amount for these districts ranges from \$1 to \$1,207 per pupil.



**Data from Minnesota Department of Education, Referendum Success Summary**

While history shows that the voters almost always pass referendum renewal questions, current state law requires school districts to spend tens of thousands of dollars and countless hours of staff and parent time on these elections. With state funding flat for the past three years, school districts have been forced to make major budget reductions including laying off staff and cutting programs. Money that must be spent on renewing an existing referendum could be redirected to the classroom if locally elected school boards were allowed to renew an existing referendum. In addition, the hundreds of volunteer hours required to pass a referendum could be spent volunteering in our schools and helping our students.

With the state facing a \$5 billion deficit, there is a tremendous amount of uncertainty around education funding. State policymakers could provide some stability by adopting SF 637, legislation allowing locally elected school boards to renew an existing operating referendum by a majority vote of the school board. In 2010, this reform proposal was included in the Omnibus Education Finance Bill but the bill ultimately failed to pass because of controversy over a proposal to establish alternative pathways to teacher licensure.

SF 637 does NOT increase property tax levels as the authority only applies if a school board votes to renew an existing referendum at the same level. By passing this legislation, state policymakers would go a long way toward providing some stability for our school districts as well as making sure that scarce resources are spent helping students achieve rather than being spent on elections.