Apathy, Ignorance, Tax Resistance Menace School Issues

Editor's Note—Financing America's public school system has become an increasingly costly and complex task. How is the man in the middle—the local taxpayer—bearing up? This is the first of three articles on some major factors in school financing as Congress considers federal aid.

By G. K. HODENFIELD
AP Education Writer

There are three main threats to every school bond issue, every school tax levy placed on the ballot in this country: apathy, ignorance, and resistance to taxes.

Of course there are many other reasons why school bonds and taxes are voted down.

School administrators may get grabby with public money. They may ask for facilities that aren't really needed. They may go overboard on luxurious frills.

But time after time, where the need seems urgent and the cause legitimate, it is apathy, ignorance, and resistance to taxes that defeat school bond issues at the polls, frighten some school boards into postponing requests for needed funds, or asking for much less than they really need.

The extent to which these factors operate was shown in a newsman's survey in St. Louis, Mo., and Parma, Ohio—one a city where a bond issue was defeated recently, the other where it passed on a second try.

The problems these communities face are typical of the problems confronting school boards, administrators and taxpayers almost everywhere.

Most large cities have, like St. Louis, school buildings erected many years ago and sadly antiquated. Most also have their slums, where the tax return is lowest but the educational needs greatest.

Suburbs like Parma face similar problems across the nation—young families with lots of children, but little if any industry to ease the tax burden on the homeowner.

Details differ from city to city, but the basic question remains the same—where are they to get money for their schools?

Let's look at the three factors in some specific cases.

Apathy: Last May, 5.7 per cent of the registered voters in St. Louis, Mo., went to the polls and voted "no" on two school bond issues totaling $29.5 million.

The "no" turnout was one registered voter out of 15, but it was enough to defeat the bond issues because 82.2 per cent of the registered voters didn't bother to vote that day.

Ignorance: a housewife in St. Louis was outraged. "It's criminal the way they have raised our property taxes," she said. "You just wouldn't believe how much they're soaking us." But she couldn't say whether her property taxes were closer to $100 or $1,000.

Resistance to taxes: A man living on a pension in Parma, Ohio, said, "I know we need new schools. But I can't afford to pay higher taxes. I'm being taxed to death. If my income went up, I'd be willing to have my taxes raised for the schools. But I can't pay any more out of what I'm getting now."

It is against this background that the question of federal aid to education is now being fought out again in Congress.

Is aid necessary? Each side is marshaling facts and figures.

Proponents cite statistics compiled by the U.S. Office of Education?

As of last fall, public school enrollment was at a record high of 36.3 million pupils . . . there was a shortage of 142,100 classrooms . . . there were about 685,000 pupils on curtailed or half-day sessions . . . altogether there were 1,868,000 pupils in excess of normal classroom capacity.

Others quote the U.S. Chamber of Commerce: "The classroom shortage is largely a paper emergency. States and communities for the most part have been and are building an adequate number of classrooms to accommodate the nation's school-age population."

The National Education Association (NEA), representing 700,000 professional educators, says there is a shortage of 135,000 teachers. The chamber of commerce says, "for some time it has been clear that the teacher shortage is diminishing except in particular subject matter areas in secondary education."

The chamber says the teacher shortage is easing because of higher teachers' salaries, and that in recent years teachers' salaries have risen more, proportionately, than the wages of all employed people.

But the one man most concerned—the homeowner on a fixed salary or pension, worried about the education of his children or grandchildren, fighting the battle of inflation, scratching to pay his taxes—what does he think.

To learn that this reporter went to Parma, Ohio, and St. Louis, Mo. I asked people whether they had voted in the recent school bond elections, how they had voted, and why. This was no attempt at a scientific survey. I just asked people to talk, and the things they said were much the same in both Parma and St Louis, although these cities are about as unlike as they could be.

Parma had voted down a $3-million bond issue and a school tax levy last May, although it approved both of them the second time around in November. The people of St. Louis, three times in a period of nine months, voted down a badly needed $29.5 million school bond issue.

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JFK Consults Executives On Problems

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Kennedy plans to put top representatives of American management and labor to work today helping him solve one of the nation's most pressing problems.

Kennedy called members of his 21-man advisory committee on labor-management policy to the White House for briefings from him and a half dozen mainstays in his administration.

The President has made it clear he wants members of the advisory group to put aside partisan views and approach a wide array of national problems from the standpoint of what's best for the country as a whole.

On that basis, the President has said he will ask the group to consider means for licking many problems other than traditional labor-management differences.

Topics which the White House said would be considered in the closed-door talks today include industrial relations problems in defense industries, the international balance of payments situation, America's competitive position abroad, the administration program for economic growth, along with wage-price and employment problems.

The committee, created by Kennedy's executive order Feb. 16, consists of seven representatives each of management and organized labor, five public members and Secretary of Labor Arthur J. Goldberg and Secretary of Commerce Luther H. Hodges.

Goldberg, designated chairman for this year, has said that on one problem—maintaining America's competitive position abroad and increasing exports—labor and management both have a heavy stake and can find a common ground.

Due to address the advisory group beside the President, are Goldberg and Hodges, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Treasury Douglas Dillon, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and Walter W. Heller, chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers.

Kennedy was reminded at his news conference last week that prior attempts at getting labor and management together on mutual problems generally had been colossal flops. He said he hoped this one would prove more successful and enduring.

"I am hopeful that we can encourage a public interest philosophy among all the groups which will provide progress," he said.

Drove Him In!

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — When police arrested Albert Torres, 20, Sunday on charges of possessing burglary tools, he said he tipped officers off on himself because he wanted to spend the night in jail to escape what he called a "nagging wife."

Torres got his wish.

Police quoted him as saying he told his wife that if she didn't cut out the nagging he'd get himself arrested. She didn't believe him, he said.