

OPINIONS

Schools share results of engagement survey

Last November, voters in our school district rejected renewing a referendum that would have provided funding to maintain programs and services. We acknowledge and respect the community's decision.

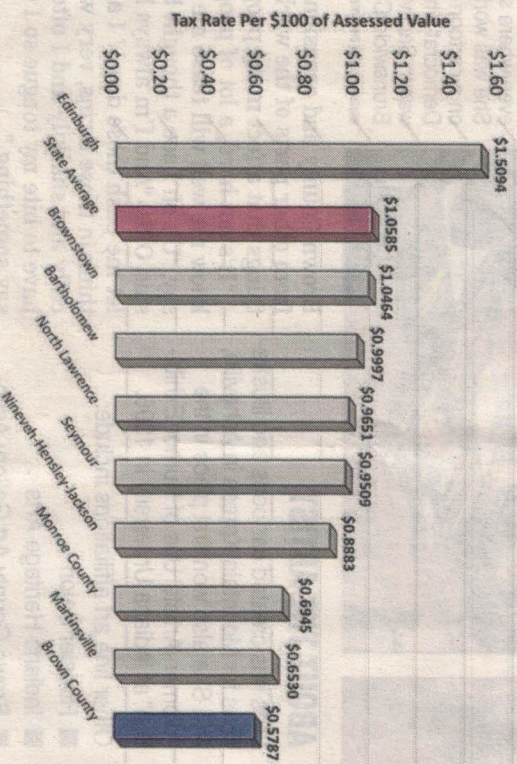


EMILY TRACY
GUEST COLUMNIST

In response, Brown County Schools cut staff positions/hours, increased class sizes, and reduced course offerings and co-curricular activities for students. Despite these efforts, we are still facing financial challenges. It is essential for the community to understand our financial situation, how we have responded, and the impact it is having on our staff, students, and community. We are concerned that additional cuts will have significant impacts on those we serve.

The Board of School Trustees works hard to be good stewards of your tax dollars. Brown County's school tax rate is near the bottom of the state (8th lowest), the bottom of comparison schools, and 15% below the level in 2021.

School Tax Rates
State & Regional Comparisons



Graph of school tax rates, Tracy said this graph is telling of how low the Brown County School tax rate is compared to the average in Indiana and the schools surrounding.

DEMOCRAT GRAPHIC

A few of the survey highlights:

Response rate

■ 1,463 total community members responded to the survey resulting in just over 18% response rate.

Age

■ 41% of the respondents were over the age of 65.
■ 18% of the respondents were age 55-64
■ 15% of the respondents were age 45-54

■ 18% of the respondents were age 35-44
■ 7% of the respondents were age 25-34

Primary residence

■ 93% of respondents noted Brown County to be their primary residence

Township respondent percentage:

■ Washington: 34%
■ Jackson: 25%
■ Hamblen: 27%
■ Van Buren: 14%

Questions

The survey consisted of just three questions:

1. District voters approved a referendum in 2016 that provided the district a total of \$0.08 for every \$100 of assessed property value. That funding will expire at the end of 2023. If voters approve renewing a future referendum at the same rate, we would be better able to:

■ Keep our staff wages and benefits competitive in our

(SEE SURVEY PAGE A6)

SURVEY

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our region and attract and retain high-quality employees. Our starting compensation is below what bordering school districts offer.

■ Maintain programs and services for students and the staffing needed to supervise them. Would you support renewing the current referendum to maintain programs/ services and compensation? Approval would not increase the school tax rate over the current level.

93% of Resident Staff responded: YES

87% of Resident Parents responded: YES

4% of Resident Staff: Undecided

5% of Resident Parents: Undecided

3% of Resident Staff: NO

8% of Resident Parents: NO

Non-Resident Staff and Non-Resident Staff:

77% responded: Yes

9% responded: Undecided

14% responded: NO

2. A portion of the referendum currently in place (\$0.01 for every \$100 of assessed property value) funds adult education programming/Career Resource Center (CRC). This includes such things as earning high school equivalency degrees, medical assistant training, and electrician training.

Would you support renewing the current referendum to maintain programs/ services and compensation? Approval would not increase the school tax rate over the current level. *

81% of Resident Staff responded: YES

76% of Resident Parents responded: YES

7% of Resident Staff: Undecided

9% of Resident Parents: Undecided

12% of Resident Staff: NO

15% of Resident Parents:

NO

Non-Resident Staff and Non-Resident Staff:

75% responded: Yes

9% responded: Undecided

16% responded: NO

3. One other initiative could be funded by expanding the operational referendum. Attracting & Retaining Staff: We could expand our staff compensation plan by putting us on par with nearby districts.

Would you support expanding the operational referendum by \$0.02 for every \$100 of assessed value to fund the staff compensation plan?

Resulting in an approximate monthly tax increase of:

\$1.97 over the current level for the 2023 median home value in our school district

\$0.03 over the current level for 1 acre of ag land

\$1.66 over the current level for every \$100,000 of commercial/rental property *

85% of Resident Staff responded: YES

79% of Resident Parents responded: YES

9% of Resident Staff: Undecided

8% of Resident Parents: Undecided

6% of Resident Staff: NO

13% of Resident Parents: NO

Non-Resident Staff and Non-Resident Staff:

64% responded: Yes

11% responded: Undecided

25% responded: NO

Cost-cutting options were also provided for community members to weigh in on if they do not support an upcoming referendum. Some of these options included:

■ Increased class sizes
■ Reduction of course offerings

■ Reduction or elimination of athletic and performing arts programs

■ Delay of technology upgrades

■ Reduce maintenance of buildings

■ Reduction of academic supports, transportation services and curriculum updates

So what's next for Brown County Schools? The board will decide in January / February whether or not to add a referendum question to the May 2024 ballot. Because the referendum failed last November, we will need to obtain a petition to legally add it

again in May. The law states that since the November 2022 referendum was defeated, a new referendum may not be on an election ballot and held within 700 days (Oct. 8, 2024) unless a sufficient petition of 500 persons who are either property owners or registered voters of Brown County is filed requesting 350 days (Oct. 24, 2023).

To ensure we are prepared to put it on the May 2024 ballot, we have begun the petition process and I am incredibly proud to have obtained over 715 signatures in support of a referendum for the May 2024 ballot. Once those signatures are certified by our county government offices, the Board of School Trustees can take action regarding a proposed spending plan for an upcoming referendum. I urge you to reach out to me if you have questions, concerns, and ideas for our school district. I welcome any meeting, in person, by telephone, or by email, whichever is convenient for you to discuss this important matter within our community. There are a lot of misconceptions floating around and I want to help provide clarity regarding the state of our schools and the referendum process.

I want to thank all of our supporters who embarked upon a relentless pursuit to ensure voices were captured on our community engagement survey and a minimum of 500 signatures were obtained for the petition.

Brown County Schools are vital to this community. We are serving our families with over 1,500 students in our county and they are worth every penny. They are worth the World Class Opportunities we continue to build out with them and for them. Our educators are worth every penny also. It is my relentless pursuit to recruit and retain the best of the best for our students. It is our small school environment that leads to lifelong impact. Brown County is worth it!

Emily Tracy is the Superintendent of Brown County Schools