

# THE MORRIS LEATHERMAN COMPANY

## WINONA AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 2022 RESIDENTIAL STUDY

### *Key Findings and Implications*

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

The typical Winona Area School District resident lived there for 19.0 years. Twenty-eight percent resided there for ten years or less, while 25% lived there for over 30 years. The median age of adult residents is 48.0 years old. Twenty-four percent are under 35 years old; twenty-one percent are 65 years old and older. The typical resident has some post-secondary experience, though short of college graduation. Twenty-seven percent report high school graduation or less. Thirty-four percent have post-secondary educational experience, and 40% are college graduates or postgraduates. Men and women are equally represented in the sample.

Twenty-three percent of the School District's households contain Winona Area Public School students; six percent use other alternatives, such as parochial or private schools or other public schools. Seventy-one percent report no school-aged children at home, although 43% of this group are alumni parents. Fourteen percent of the households report the presence of an infant or preschooler.

Twenty percent rent their current residence. The median value of owner-occupied housing is \$161,500.00. 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-eight percent report no fiscal stress – either managing comfortably and putting money aside or managing very well. Sixty-seven percent live in the City of Winona, 18% reside in another city, 12% live in a rural non-farm area, and three percent reside on a farm.

Twenty-two percent report household members used Community Education programs offered by the School District during the past year. An additional 22% of non-current users have done so in the past. The reach of these programs – current and former participants – is a significant 39%.

Forty-two percent report they are “Democrats,” 38% are “Republican,” and 20% say they are “Independent.”

**General Perceptions of the Winona Area School District:**

Interviewees were read eight statements about the School District and asked if they agreed or disagreed with each one.

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Our community receives a good value for its investment in local public schools.	82%	10%
I trust the current Winona Area Public School Board and Administration to do what is right for children in this District.	75%	16%
The Winona Area School Board and Administration do a good job of involving community leaders, parents, and interested citizens, in decisions about the schools.	73%	18%
The Winona Area Public School District Board and Administration have spent past referendum funds responsibly.	71%	17%
When the Winona Area Public Schools ask voters to approve a referendum, it is only after all other budget alternatives have been considered.	71%	19%
During the last couple of years, the Winona Area School District Administration and Board have spent tax money effectively and efficiently.	70%	17%
The Winona Area Public Schools are a good investment, and I would support a property tax increase to protect that investment.	61%	23%
I am satisfied with the School District’s decision-making.	55%	31%

Respondents provide “supermajorities” in agreement with all but two, shaded in blue, but agreement varies between 55% and 82%. The two exceptions focus on “supporting a property tax increase to protect their investment in the public schools” and “satisfaction with the School District’s decision-making.” Unsurprisingly, considering the current issues environment, the greatest disagreement also occurs on these two statements.

**School District Decision-Making:**

By a 55%-31% margin, residents agree with the statement, “I am satisfied with the School District’s decision-making. They were then asked if there were a specific issue that came to mind.

Specific Issues	Total
<b>Agreement</b>	
Programs/Curriculum	15%
COVID-19 protocols	11%
Financial management	6%
Sports/Extra-curriculars	6%
High academic standards	5%
High quality teachers	5%
Community involvement	5%
Mental health support	4%

<i>Specific Issues</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Disagreement</b>	
Financial management	14%
Too political	3%
Too focused on sports	3%
Diversity issues	2%
COVID-19 protocols	2%
<b>Idiosyncratic</b>	
Scattered	12%
No specific issue	6%
Unsure/Refused	1%

Two-thirds agreeing with the statement cite five current issues: “programs/curriculum,” “COVID-19 protocols,” “financial management,” “diversity issues,” and “sports/extra-curriculars.” One half of the disagreement with the statement stems from “financial management.”

**School District Job Performance Ratings:**

Job performance ratings were sought about three groups of District leadership and staff. In each case, favorable job ratings range between 57% and 79% in the overall sample.

<i>Rating</i>	<i>School Board</i>	<i>Superintendent</i>	<i>Teachers and Instructional Staff</i>
Excellent	12%	18%	41%
Good	46%	39%	35%
Only Fair	<b>29%</b>	<b>22%</b>	10%
Poor	<b>6%</b>	<b>8%</b>	1%
Unsure	8%	13%	14%

Strong favorable ratings, between 58% and 76%, are awarded to each of the three groups. Unfavorable ratings are at the norm for both the School Board, at 35%, and the Superintendent, at 30%.

**Financial Management:**

The threshold for a positive evaluation of the economic management of a school district is 50%. Interviewees give Winona Area School District a favorable rating of 56%.

<i>Financial Management Rating</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Excellent	12%
Good	44%
Only Fair	<b>26%</b>
Poor	<b>12%</b>
Unsure	7%

Negative ratings are at 38%, again at the statewide norm, with seven percent uncertainty.

Next, residents were asked if they think the Winona Area Public Schools are adequately funded. The table below shows the results.

<b><i>School District Adequately Funded</i></b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	49%
No	42%
Unsure	9%

District residents are split on the adequacy of funding: 49% think current funding is adequate, and 42% believe the opposite, with nine percent unsure.

***Property Tax Climate:***

The property tax climate was gauged by asking respondents two questions about how their total property taxes in this community compared with neighboring areas. The first query asked about their total property taxes. The responses are tabulated below.

<b><i>Total Property Taxes compared with Neighboring Areas</i></b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very high	12%
Somewhat high	22%
About average	58%
Somewhat low	3%
Very low	0%
Unsure	6%

A 58% majority of respondents think their total property taxes are comparatively “about average.” Thirty-four percent view them as “high.”

The second query asked interviewees to focus on their school taxes. The responses are tabulated below.

<b><i>School Taxes compared with Neighboring Areas</i></b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very high	12%
Somewhat high	27%
About average	48%
Somewhat low	0%
Very low	0%
Unsure	13%

A 48% plurality think their school taxes are comparatively “about average.” Thirty-nine percent view them as “high.”

As a result of these levels, the tax climate in the Winona Area School District must be deemed “tax sensitive.”

**School District Buildings and Facilities:**

Respondents were asked for a general evaluation of the District’s Elementary Schools.

<b>General Evaluation of District’s Elementary Schools</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Excellent	13%
Good	56%
Only fair	<b>18%</b>
Poor	<b>3%</b>
Unsure/Refused	11%

A 69% supermajority rates the elementary schools as either “excellent” or “good.” Twenty-one percent rate them as “only fair” or “poor,” and 11% are “unsure.” The group of unfavorable ratings stem from three concerns: “old and outdated,” “need maintenance,” and “need flexible learning spaces.”

Next, respondents were queried about the District’s Middle School.

<b>General Evaluation of District’s Middle School</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Excellent	17%
Good	68%
Only fair	3%
Poor	1%
Unsure/Refused	12%

An 85% supermajority rates the Middle School as either “excellent” or “good.” Only four percent rate it as “only fair” or “poor,” and 12% are “unsure.” The group of unfavorable ratings stem from two concerns: “improve safety and security” and “need maintenance.”

Residents were asked to comment on the Senior High School building.

<b>General Evaluation of District’s Senior High School</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Excellent	18%
Good	61%
Only fair	9%
Poor	2%
Unsure/Refused	10%

A 79% supermajority rates the Senior High School as either “excellent” or “good.” Eleven percent rate it as “only fair” or “poor,” and 10% are “unsure.” The set of unfavorable ratings stem from two concerns: “improve safety and security” and “need classroom space.”

Finally, respondents were asked to evaluate the Winona Area Learning Center building.

<b>General Evaluation of Winona Area Learning Center</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Excellent	13%

<b>General Evaluation of Winona Area Learning Center</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Good	64%
Only fair	2%
Poor	1%
Unsure/Refused	21%

A 77% supermajority rates the Winona Area Learning Center as either “excellent” or “good.” Only three percent rate it as “only fair” or “poor,” and a larger 21% are “unsure.” The set of unfavorable ratings stem from two concerns: “no gymnasium” and “improve security and safety.”

**Flexible Learning Spaces:**

Respondents were initially told:

*There have been discussions about the need today for public school buildings to contain flexible learning spaces, so students can learn in one-on-one, small group, and large group sessions. As a result, programs can be better tailored to meet individual learning needs, and more innovative teaching approaches can be employed.*

They were then asked to rate the importance of classroom design to student learning. The table below arrays those responses.

<b>Importance of Flexible Learning Spaces to Student Learning</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very important	40%
Somewhat important	44%
Not too important	11%
Not at all important	3%
Unsure/Refused	2%

An exceptionally large 84% majority rate the importance of flexible learning spaces to student learning as either “very important” or “somewhat important;” in fact, 40% rate it as “very important.” Fourteen percent rate it lower, while only two percent are unsure.

Next, residents were queried if they believe Winona Area Public School buildings can provide sufficient flexible learning spaces to meet a variety of instruction and learning styles.

<b>School District Buildings Currently Provide Sufficient Flexible Learning Spaces</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	55%
No	27%
Unsure/Refused	18%

By a 55%-27% split, with 18% unsure, respondents believe the Winona Area Public School buildings currently provide for sufficient flexible learning spaces.

**Discussions about a Long-Term Facilities Plan:**

Respondents were informed:

*For the last few months, the Winona Area School District has been discussing options for a long-term facilities plan to meet current and future space, health, safety, and educational needs. Independent experts assessed the current schools, including the quality of classrooms, the adequacy of space, security measures, safety, air quality, and operating costs.*

They were then asked a short series of questions about these discussions.

Fifty-three percent report they are following these discussions “very closely” or “somewhat closely.” Thirty-four percent say they are “not really following that closely,” while 14% admit they are “not following it all.” By a 73%-14% majority, with 13% unsure, residents believe “the District is doing a good job involving parents, local citizens, and community leaders in the discussions about future facilities’ needs.” By a 77%-9% majority, with 15% unsure, respondents believe “the District is trying to find a plan that benefits students and staff of the Winona Area School District.” But, by a lower split of 59%-24%, with 18% unsure, residents also believe “the District is trying to find a plan that is fair to local taxpayers.” In comparison with other Greater Minnesota School Districts, the disagreement with the last statement is lower than the norm of 33%.

***Bond Referendum Atmospherics:***

Initially, respondents were asked about their predisposition toward a tax increase for the Winona Area School District.

<b><i>Predisposition toward Increasing School Taxes</i></b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Against almost any tax increase	26%
Vote for under some conditions; vote against under other conditions	47%
For almost any tax increase	25%
Unsure/Refused	3%

The quick difference among all residents is -1%, indicating opponents begin with a one percent advantage at the start of a referendum campaign. However, the actual vote will depend on how the persuadable plurality splits on Election Day.

Interviewees were next asked to consider an increase in funding to address building and facility needs. This would require a property tax increase; they were asked about their willingness to pay additional property taxes.

<b><i>Willingness to Accept Monthly Property Tax Increase</i></b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Nothing	29%
\$6.00	25%
\$12.00	18%
\$18.00	11%
\$24.00	2%
\$30.00	1%
\$36.00	0%
Over \$36.00	0%
Unsure/Refused	15%

The median resident would accept a \$6.50 per month or \$78.00 per year property tax increase. A sizable 29% would accept no tax increase for this purpose.

Next, respondents were asked for their support or opposition of a property tax increase for six potential uses of those funds. The results are listed in rank order from highest to lowest in support.

<b><i>Property Tax Increase for Potential Use</i></b>	<b><i>Support</i></b>	<b><i>Oppose</i></b>
Deferred maintenance improvements, including HVAC, ADA accessibility, roofs, and carpeting across all district schools	76%	20%
Remodel classrooms at all three Elementary Schools and the High School to have flexible learning spaces and new furniture	74%	25%
Renovate the current shop space to support Career-Technical Education at the High School	70%	21%
Upgrade sound and acoustic systems in the auditorium and renovate the current music classrooms at the High School	60%	36%
Renovate the bathrooms and perform needed maintenance, including replacing the artificial turf at Paul Giel Field	56%	40%
Construction of an additional gymnasium with locker rooms at the High School	55%	40%

At least 55% of residents support all six potential uses of new funding. Opposition to a tax increase for each option remains below 30% for three uses, shaded in blue. Two potential uses, shaded in orange, post opposition at 40% -- the threshold indicating a potential “referendum request killers” if the cost of both are a large percentage share of the total package.

Respondents were informed the total cost to complete these improvements could be as much as \$87,000,000.00. Fifty-three percent see this as a “fair price,” while 33% do not, and 15% are unsure.

***Specific Bond Referendum Proposal:***

Respondents were told:

*If voters approved an 87 million dollar bond referendum to fund the improvements discussed above, the owner of a \$200,000.00 home would see a monthly property tax increase of about \$17.00 or approximately \$203.00 per year for twenty years. The owner of an agricultural homestead valued at \$5,000.00 per acre would see a monthly increase of about 5¢ per acre or approximately 56¢ per acre per year for twenty years.*

They were asked if the election were today, how would they vote on the bond referendum.

<b><i>Vote on Bond Referendum</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>
Strongly support	18%
Support	<b>38%</b>
Oppose	25%
Strongly oppose	15%
Unsure/Refused	5%



By a 56%-40% majority, respondents support the bond referendum proposal. In any special or primary election day, the group most likely to not come to the polls is “weak supporters,” who number 38%. This finding means the focus of the referendum campaign must be two-fold: first, clear demonstration of the need (and potential consequences if it is unmet); second, generating enthusiasm and motivating weak supporters to go to the polls. Unless this is accomplished, a lower than average turnout among weak supporters will lead to a significant defeat at the polls.

Supporters based their vote on four factors: “importance of education,” “children in the School District,” “reasonable cost,” and “needed.” Opponents cited: “poor District spending,” “high cost,” no children in the public schools,” “taxes are already too high,” and “not needed.”

Residents were reminded that two elementary schools, Jefferson, and W-K, were built in the 1930’s and are registered as historic buildings. Goodview Elementary School was built in 1971. They were then asked if they think the three elementary schools can meet the needs of educating children today.

<i><b>Current Elementary Schools Meeting Need of Today’s Children</b></i>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	59%
No	23%
Unsure/Refused	18%

By over two-to-one, 59%-23%, respondents think the three schools can meet the needs of educating today’s children.

Respondents were next informed that there has been discussion about building a new elementary school instead of remodeling the three current schools. They were then asked which approach they preferred remodeling the three elementary schools or building a new elementary school.

<i><b>Remodel or Build New</b></i>	<b>Percentage</b>
Remodel/Strongly	29%
Remodel	25%
Build New	6%
Build New/Strongly	2%
Neither	<b>30%</b>
Unsure/Refused	9%

Among residents offering an opinion about the two approaches, remodeling the three existing elementary schools decisively beats building a new school, by a 54%-8% margin. One foreshadowing of the difficulty of any referendum proposal, though, is the 30% subsample who support neither approach.

The small subsample of respondents who want to build a new elementary school were told:

*If a new elementary school were built it could cost between 30% and 40% more than the cost to remodel all three elementary schools. It would also be difficult to find undeveloped land outside of the city limits of Winona. Finally, the School District would likely need to close all three of the current elementary schools to accommodate a new building.*

They were then asked if they would still support building a new elementary school instead of remodeling the current schools.

<b>Still Support a New Elementary School Building given these Facts</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	45%
No	55%
Unsure/Refused	0%

Fifty-five percent of the initial support for the new elementary school withdrew their backing. The new level of support for building a new elementary school dropped to four percent of the sample.

**Sources of Information:**

Next, sampled citizens were asked about the most credible sources of School District information. The table below arrays each information source they cited.

<b>Principal Source of Information</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
School District newsletter	24%
Local newspaper	24%
Word-of-mouth	17%
School District website	17%
Social media	6%
E-mail	4%
On-line newspapers	2%
E-newsletter	2%
Nothing	3%
Scattered	2%

Most interviewees post one of four credible sources of information: “School District newsletter,” “local newspaper,” “word-of-mouth,” and “School District website.” Together they reach 82% of the households in the Winona Area School District.

Sampled residents were asked what the most effective way for receiving information about the School District would be. The table below arrays each information source cited.

<b>Most Effective Way to Receive Information about Winona Area Public Schools</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Mailed newsletter	29%
Local newspaper	24%
School District website	16%
Social media	9%
Word-of-mouth	8%
E-mail	7%
e-Newsletter	2%
Scattered	3%
Unsure/Refused	2%

Respondents agree on the six most effective ways to receive School District information: “mailed newsletter,” “local newspaper,” “School District website,” “social media,” “word-of-mouth,” and “e-mail.” The mix of these six channels reaches 93% of the households in the School District.

**Target Groups:**

There are several groups which form the bulk of the coalition supporting the bond referenda. Groups marked with a \* have “unlikely” voters providing majorities in favor of the referendum question. Further specific targeting for information and get-out-the-vote activities should be considered for each group:

- Residents for ten years or less
- Community Education users during the past year \*
- Residents under 55 years old
- Parents of preschoolers and infants \*
- Parents of Winona Area School District students \*
- Renters
- Owners of less than \$150,000 homes
- Democrats \*
- City of Winona residents \*
- Rural non-farm residents

There are three exceptionally effective ways of reaching pools of target voters: “mailed and electronic newsletters,” “e-mail,” and “School District website.” While the other major sources of information should not be ignored, proponents should add more weight to these three channels in their media mix.

**Conclusions:**

1. The School District choose the right alternative for its bond referendum proposal. Support for the remodeling of the three elementary schools reaches 54%. Only eight percent of the sample supports the building new approach; support further falls when respondents are informed the three current elementary schools will need to be closed.
2. The success or failure of the proposal rests on factors well beyond the control of the School District. Inflation, and worse yet, recession, can fragment the electorate. Since 42% report they are financially struggling and 56% support the referendum, any economic downturn can rapidly and negatively impact current support. The development of a “red wave” election can adversely impact the election, since growing turnout advantages among Republicans will bring larger numbers of opponents to the polls.
3. The opposition to any approach is 30%. This subsample is a hurdle in any referendum election and means that almost one-third of the sample is already against any proposal. When the tax increase for an 87 million dollar bond proposal is discussed in more detail, pre-campaign opposition rises to 40%.
4. Unlike most school districts, where the principal cleavage line is parent of public school child-non-parent of public school child, in the Winona Area Public School District it is party identification – Republican, Democrat, or Independent. Republicans and Independents oppose the bond referendum by a 56%-39% majority while Democrats support it by a 79%-17% supermajority.

5. The presence of Winona Area Public School children is a secondary variable which impacts Republicans and Independents: when a school child is present, the parents/guardians split 79%-15% in favor of the proposal. This strongly suggests the campaign effort should concentrate on its parent lists to contact this highly supportive subsample.
6. The School District should reconsider its tax impact of the bond referendum question and, if possible, somewhat decrease it. Being twice as high as the median acceptability levels can be successful at the polls if there are improvements listed that attract solid support and lower opposition.
7. In non-Presidential year elections, turnout drops in Minnesota. Gubernatorial elections register large turnout declines, so predictions about the likely voter pool are essential. Using an index of three questions – following local elections, voting in past off-year and special elections, and likelihood to vote in the November 2022 election – the likely turnout is 53.0%. Of course, this could change in either direction depending on events occurring during the many campaigns on the ballot. The School District should undertake an aggressive information effort, while a grassroots volunteer committee should mount a persuasion and get-out-the-vote campaign, particularly of identified target voters.
8. Creating far more enthusiasm among current parents for the passage of the bond referenda should be the central focus of any information effort or grassroots campaign.
9. A possible marketing tactic for the bond referendum would provide cost information by considering a “per-week comparison.” In other words, break the tax costs for different homes and farms down to a per-week basis and then compare the cost with distinct types of purchases. The items chosen for comparisons should not be flashpoints – neither food nor gasoline – and should allow for some playful humor.

***Methodology:***

This study contains the results of a sample of 400 randomly selected adult residents residing in the Winona Area School District. Professional interviewers conducted the survey by telephone between May 23<sup>rd</sup> and June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. The typical respondent took 12 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The non-response rate was 4.5%. The results of the study are projectable to all adult Winona Area School District residents within  $\pm 5.0\%$  in 95 out of 100 cases. Households were classified according to their telephone use: forty-five percent are “cell phone only households, 12% are “landline only households,” and 43% are “both cellphone and landline households.”