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K-12 CAPITAL PLANNING

Passing the Bond: What K-12 Districts Are Up Against in 2026, and How to Get Ahead of It

By Roth IAMS | August 2026

Summary. A bond measure used to be a question of need. Now it's a question of whether voters trust the district to spend the money well, and that is a harder case to make from a list of round numbers. Rising costs, expiring federal funding and shifting enrollment have all moved the bar the same way. Here is what districts are up against in 2026, and the five things that separate the measures that pass from the ones that don't.

IN THIS ARTICLE

School districts across the country are heading into another heavy bond season, and the numbers tell a mixed story. Nationally, bond passage rates have been sliding, from roughly 80% in some spring elections down to closer to 54% in others, a reminder that voter approval is no longer a given, even in districts with obvious facility needs. With tens of billions of dollars in K-12 capital projects on the table for 2026, the districts that succeed are the ones treating the referendum as a planning and communication challenge, not just a financial one.

The Challenges Districts Are Facing

- **Voter fatigue and affordability concerns**. Rising costs, expiring pandemic-era federal funding, and tighter household budgets are making voters more cautious about tax increases, even for popular projects like safety upgrades or HVAC replacement.
- **Declining and shifting enrollment**. Many districts are trying to justify new construction or renovations while simultaneously managing enrollment decline or uneven growth across schools, a tension that invites tough questions from taxpayers and school boards alike.
- **Scope creep vs. scope clarity**. Districts increasingly bundle safety, infrastructure, and technology upgrades into single comprehensive bond packages. That can build broader support, but it also raises the bar for clear, specific communication about where the money goes.
- **Community trust and timing.** Bonds that pass tend to share a common thread: months of authentic community engagement before the campaign ever reaches the ballot. Districts that skip this step, or start it too late, are more likely to see their measure fail or face organized opposition.
- **Aging buildings, modern expectations.** Well over a third of instructional buildings predate 1970, yet families and staff expect facilities that support current safety standards, career and technical education, and flexible learning environments. Bridging that gap credibly, with real data, not just aspiration, matters more to voters than it used to.

What Districts Need to Do

- **Start with a real facilities assessment.** A long-range facilities plan, built with input from facilities and financial experts, gives the district defensible, specific data instead of round figures that invite skepticism.
- **Engage the community early and often.** Forums, surveys, and transparent tax-impact information, well before the bond goes to the board, build the trust that decides close elections.
- **Prioritize ruthlessly.** Voters respond better to a clearly scoped list of needs (safety, HVAC, classroom additions) than to an all-things-to-everyone package that feels vague or padded.
- **Plan for the pipeline, not just the vote.** Passing the bond is the beginning, not the end. Districts need a realistic construction and financing timeline in place before the election, so momentum doesn't stall the moment votes are certified.

- **Bring in outside expertise early.** Districts that loop in program partners during the planning phase, not after the bond passes, consistently produce stronger, better-supported measures.

The 2026 bond season is shaping up as a test of discipline as much as need. Districts that pair a defensible facilities plan with early, honest community engagement and a realistic post-election construction and financing timeline are the ones clearing the bar, even as national approval rates trend lower. Several of the year's largest bond measures, including a $775 million bond in Colorado Springs and a $430 million bond in Hillsboro, Oregon, are still on the November ballot, so the cycle is far from settled.

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