



Communications Now

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Communicating about budget cuts

Cutting budgets and living with the consequences is difficult. It's worse if your community doesn't understand the reductions or doesn't believe they had to be made. If community members don't believe you are managing money well, it will be difficult for them to believe you have to make cuts.

Building and keeping community support requires hard, year-round work. Here are some proven practices for building understanding about your jurisdiction's finances and getting the support your schools need.

Build trust with community members

Trust is important especially in areas of money management. This requires face-to-face communications about the jurisdiction's budget and transparency in financial and other matters.

Explain the budget in simple terms

By using simple terms you can demonstrate a consistent effort to direct funds toward students and their learning. Avoid jargon or accounting terms. Use graphs or charts to explain revenue sources. If revenue has dropped use two side-by-side bar or circle graphs to illustrate the impact.

Pick budget headings carefully

When showing where jurisdiction funding comes from and how it is spent, use language that relates to your primary mission: teaching and learning. Words like teaching, teaching support and counseling services communicate clearly.

This will show your public the large percentage of funding that goes directly into student learning. It also sends the message that it is impossible to reduce spending without affecting services to students.

Don't categorize expenditures by salaries, benefits, and maintenance or by teachers, school support staff, school administration and central administration. These categories invite unrealistic suggestions from those who do not know all of the facts about how these topics relate to programs for students.

Develop a strong presentation

Have your jurisdiction's most-respected spokesperson give a well-thought-out presentation to every group possible. Start with jurisdiction staff.

This presentation should clearly show sources of revenue and how revenue is spent, with emphasis on student learning and direct services to students.

It should illustrate the dilemma posed by decreasing resources, increasing costs and other factors such as declining enrollment or overcrowding. Explain the implications of possible actions to audiences and ask them for their opinions.

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Give staff the facts

Staff members talk with community members every day. Give them accurate facts so they can help with the communications of the budget challenge. When staff understand the jurisdiction's finances and how the budget applies to their work for students, their knowledge and perceptions become the basis for strong support.

Tap into your key communicators

A strong key communicator network of trusted, well-informed community members can be a powerful force in building credibility and trust. Getting support from people who are well-known and trusted by others is like recruiting a top team of communicators to spread the support.

Involve people in the process

People learn best when they participate. Get people involved in hands-on learning that demonstrates the difficulty of reducing budgets without having a profound effect on services provided for students. Teach people in your community about your budget, how it is spent, how little is discretionary, and how difficult it is to make reductions.

Spend twice as much time listening

Active listening, especially to critics, sends the message to the whole community that you truly care about public opinion and are willing to consider every option. The feeling people get when they are listened to is much more important than any facts you want to tell them. If you can build a positive relationship through listening, your facts will be believed and you will spend much less time and money defending those facts.

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