



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
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‘Critical Questions’ Series March 2010

A Question for Budget Decisions: What Would We Do if We Really Meant It?

In general, our state’s educational system is seen as the solution to all of our societal challenges. Every year a series of well-intentioned and typically unfunded new mandates are legislated, which can erode the focus on educating all children. This crush of good intentions is compounded by the fact that in the words of the Honorable Judge Erlick: “State funding is not ample, it is not stable and it is not dependable”. Couple these two items with an economic down-turn and opportunities to engage in difficult budget conversations abound. For these conversations to be successful, each of us needs to be focused on what’s most important in our school district, or in other words “What Would We Do If We Really Meant It”?

When faced with a funding shortfall, as Federal Way has been for each of the last ten years, it is easy to jump to technical conversations first. After all, everybody wants to know what will be cut, everybody has an opinion about what should be cut (typically something else), and what should be saved. Another way to approach a budget crisis is to view it as an opportunity to focus on what’s important AND to use the budget challenges as an opportunity to build relationships. By engaging in the conversations about what’s important to your educational mission, about what philosophies or filters are guiding your decision making process, and about how final decisions will actually be made, your community can be connected to the crucial budget conversation without the angst of “taking sides”.

We all know that everything our organizations do is important to someone – otherwise we wouldn’t do it. Yet, not everything we do has equal importance. That means at least one aspect of our work is more important than anything else. That one factor is what we are talking about when we say “what would we do if we really meant it?” This is a deceptively simple question. Developing an answer requires deep reflection, multiple conversations and a public commitment. Once you know the answer to this question, you are one step closer to effectively responding to funding gaps.

A second critical question to answer involves a clear concept of the type and timing of the decision-making process to be used. For example, your organization needs to

determine if a survey or poll will be conducted and if so for what purpose. Will the survey information be used for decision making or for information? Will a survey strategy really help align resources with what's most important to the academic success of each student? The answers to these questions are critical for building trust and maintaining healthy relationships with all of your constituents. Remember, there is danger in polling your constituents if there is no clarity about how the information will be used. For example if hundreds of people oppose closing a school as a cost savings strategy and the final board decision is to close a school, has the survey strategy helped or hurt relationships?

The third component requires developing an understanding of your budget philosophies through guiding questions? The questions and answers may change from year to year based on the circumstances, but the process of defining and asking these questions is valuable. We asked the following questions in Federal Way, and the conversations have helped build community understanding and guide our budget development.

Should we:

- Make targeted reductions & additions and/or across the board reductions?
- Use one-time money on one-time expenditures and/or use one-time money to support on-going expenditures?
- Maintain ending unreserved fund balance at 3% or change the district's fund balance policy?
- Make predicted two-year reductions all at once and/or make only known one-year reductions?
- Maintain promised tax rates or collect the full voter-approved levy authorization?

Developing answers to all of these questions, of course, isn't a panacea. Not all controversy will be eliminated, but your answers will provide clear direction to guide budget conversations, build strong community relationships and focus your efforts on what's really important.

On behalf of the Federal Way School District Superintendent and Team

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