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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Making budgets easier to understand

Budget season for next school year is around the corner, and now is a good time to prepare. School budgets are complicated, influenced by difficult-to-explain variables like federal and state mandates, and part of a long process that may seem daunting or inaccessible to members of the public.

Sharing information through existing communication channels is only effective if you can engage people enough to bring them along through the process. Generally, there is a lack of interest unless budget decisions threaten special interest projects for groups or constituencies.

Setting budgets is a key role for school boards. Your staff, parents and community may seem apathetic during the process, but you should continue efforts to educate and engage them, especially if there is a likelihood there will be complaints after it is adopted.

### Outline the process

Be sure that the district calendar includes all budget meeting dates, locations and times. Make a note of meetings that will allow time for public input. Post it on your website and publish to your social media channels.

Include a budget section on your website that has a list of budget committee members, links to policy, key dates such as the adoption date, and links to past approved budgets. Summarize the process in a handout of infographic with clear and simple charts and graphs or a divided dollar bill.

Use plain language that is easy to understand and explain references to factors that affect the district's budget: program mandates, the status and amount of legislative appropriations and outside funds that are restricted, such as bond money for capital projects.

### Watch your language

Information about budgets can get muddled by technical terms that can be confusing to people who don't deal with government funding processes. These tips can help improve understanding of budget issues and terms:

Relate the school budget to a household budget. Discuss income (revenue), expenses (bills) and contingency funds (emergency fund) in terms that everyone can relate to.

Avoid acronyms. This is a good rule for educational operations and programs in general. If you work at the district office, you are fluent in educationese; if not, you probably need a translator. Be aware of terms like APCs (associated payroll costs), FICA (Social Security), FTEs (full-time equivalents), etc.

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

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Other terms that may need translation:

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**Fiscal year:** A 12-month period covered by the budget, usually from July 1 to June 30.

**Revenue or income:** Available funds from local taxes, state and federal government and other sources.

**Expenditures:** The amount of money the district spends to operate schools, including salaries, supplies and materials, facility operational costs, transportation, etc.

**Fringe benefits or associated payroll costs:** Total employee costs except salaries. These costs are usually part of a collective bargaining agreement with employee unions, and they include insurance, retirement, social security, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance and paid time off.

**FTE: Full-time equivalent is the number of employees a district would have if it totaled all** employee hours and divided them by eight hours per day, a full work day. For example, six part-time employees working four hours a day is equal to three full-time equivalents.

**Contingency fund:** Money set aside in the budget for emergencies or unforeseen expenses.

**Reserve fund:** A fund established in the budget to set aside money from one fiscal year to another for a specific purpose.

Break costs down. Many people can't relate to the big numbers in school budgets. Translate million-dollar terms into single dollar terms. If \$60 million of your \$100 million budget is allocated to teaching and \$4 million is for administration, say, "Sixty cents of every dollar is spent on teaching and learning. Four cents of every dollar is spent on administration."

### **Keep them informed**

Continue to share information throughout the budget process. Post the superintendent's message and budget proposal as soon as it's available. Contact your local media to share information. And don't forget to talk to staff. They are relaying information to parents and community members in their networks. Be sure they have the latest news.

### **Staff are trusted information sources**

Staff members are trusted sources of information. Enlist them to tell your budget story. Simply by talking to friends and neighbors about budget issues, well-informed staff members can raise community awareness and support.

From bus drivers to administrators, staff members have a wide circle of influence: neighbors, friends, relatives, parents at their schools or their children's schools, friends and acquaintances at clubs and churches, temples, or synagogues. If they have the facts, staff members have the opportunity to share about school funding and the budget process in a personal way whenever those conversations occur.

Informing staff about budget issues and decisions, inviting their input, and involving them closely in the budget process can create or strengthen a sense of connection and ownership of district-level decisions. A staff member who feels deeply connected to the district can be a powerful advocate for schools among his or her circle of influence.

Provide your staff with access to tools to help them understand and communicate the intricacies of school funding, such as:

- Side-by-side charts that show funding sources and changes in funding over time.
- Charts that show categories of allocations and percentages. Make sure it is clear how much of the budget goes to teaching and learning.
- Lists or charts that show mandated vs. non-mandated expenditures.

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- Charts that show funding per student vs. cost per student.
- Background on the rationale or priorities used to make budget decisions.

Ideally, the superintendent and/or board chair should be available for questions from staff. If you plan a speaking tour about your budget, include school staff meetings in the schedule.

Make sure staff members hear about new issues or decisions internally before information is shared with the community. This is crucial to building a sense of belonging to a team among your staff.

Keep staff up-to-date on budget issues and decision-making. Include a budget update in every issue of the staff newsletter, or send out a budget update email on a regular basis. Make sure staff have access to budget committee meeting times and minutes. Provide staff with scenarios and tips, such as how to answer difficult questions, or how to handle someone who is misinformed or angry.

And finally, be sure staff know how to share this information. Let them know if you are asking them to post on social media, respond to questions as employees or stay informed so they can answer questions.

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*Contributed by Candace Wilson, communications consultant*