

Budget Talk: A Model for Effective Community Input

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Overview

With state funding cuts looming, Highline determined it needed to cut up to \$8 million from its 2009-10 budget. The superintendent began by announcing \$2 million in central office cuts. We then devised a community input process modeled on one used in Kent School District that would 1) give us data on what items community members felt were most and least important to retain in the budget; 2) gain community good will by providing an opportunity for input; and 3) educate community members about the difficult choices that must be made in the budget reduction process.

Early communication

As soon as it became apparent that budget cuts were coming, we developed a PowerPoint presentation outlining why budget cuts were necessary, estimating the dollar amount of cuts, and promoting the opportunities for input. Principals were directed to present this to staff first, and then to parents on at least one occasion. The community budget workshops were heavily promoted.

Budget reduction packages

The superintendent's senior leadership (SLT) team developed a list of possible cuts. These were grouped into 44 "packages", each with a corresponding dollar amount. The list of packages totaled roughly \$14 million—about twice as much as we needed to cut.

Online input process

The communication office created an area on the district's homepage with information about the budget situation: the list of central office cuts, updates on the process, FAQs, the list of budget reduction packages, and most importantly, an invitation to provide comments via email. A dedicated email address was set up to receive comments. The comment form laid out the school board's budget priorities and asked a specific question:

If you were managing the district budget in these tight financial times, what areas would you prioritize and in what areas would you reduce spending? Please share your rationale and/or alternative ways to provide the services you wish to cut.

The comments were reviewed and categorized by the communication office and were forwarded to the SLT budget subcommittee and the school board.

Community Budget Workshops

We held three workshops in a period of five days, two in the evening and one on a Saturday morning. Staff, students and community members were encouraged to attend. All administrators were required to be table facilitators for at least one workshop.

Logistics:

- Child care was provided by volunteer student groups under teacher supervision.
- Non-English-speaking parents were recruited with the help of community organizations.
- Non-English speaking groups were given table facilitators fluent in their languages who walked them through the process and documented their input. They were placed in separate classrooms to allow participants to hear the facilitator more easily since the non-English process was more conversation-heavy. An administrator was assigned to each language group to answer questions through the bi-lingual facilitators.
- Workshops were held in school cafeterias with space for up to 300 participants grouped around tables, with 8 to 10 individuals at each table.

Workshop rundown

1. Facilitators arrive 30 minutes early for briefing on the process and their role.
2. Upon arrival, participants are assigned to tables with pre-numbered name tags. People who arrived together are purposely assigned to separate tables to allow for a broad range of interests at each table.
3. Each participant receives:
 - a. Fact sheet outlining central office cuts and budget priorities.
 - b. List of budget reduction packages.
 - c. Prioritization worksheet.
 - d. Evaluation form for the workshop process.
4. The superintendent makes introductory remarks explaining the reasons for the budget cuts and describing the purpose of the workshop.
5. Table facilitators explain the task: to choose budget reduction packages totaling \$6 million.
6. Participants read through the list and individually mark the items they would cut (20-30 minutes).
7. Each table group discusses their cuts and works to come to consensus on \$6 million of cuts (up to 60 minutes).
8. Participants with questions or suggested cuts not on the list are encouraged to write them on index cards provided. These are collected at the end of the evening.
9. Facilitator completes a worksheet documenting the group's cuts and turns it in.
10. Participants complete the evaluation form.

Results

Results are compiled and reported on the district website and to the school board. For transparency, each table's final worksheet is posted on the website.