

Making dollars make sense

By Tom DeLapp, President, Communication Resources for Schools

An interesting question was raised on the CalSPRA listserv recently about the impending state budget cuts and their anticipated negative impact on public schools. How should we as communicators deliver the message that our already tight budgets might just get a lot tighter? Like any other high profile situation, this is a teachable moment. Now is the time to tell a story about how money makes the educational world go round! This is also a prime moment when you can clearly demonstrate your value to the district's leadership.

Here are a few suggestions of ways to approach this very important topic in the materials and projects you work on in the next few months:

State budget reductions compound cuts from declining enrollment

About 54% of California's school districts are facing chronic declining enrollment. That means they are already cutting budgets, services and staffing to adjust to lost revenue from lost ADA. Further state cuts magnify the problem. It is very hard for people to understand school finance. It's your job to understand it enough to be able to decipher it for the average parent. **A suggestion:** attend as many budget briefings as you can in January. Read those board reports! If you have a question, make sure your budget staff can answer it to your satisfaction. Be relentless.

The COLA door doesn't swing both ways with CTA

CTA and its local units always fight vigorously to get their fair share of the state COLA. But when we are facing an "Un-COLA" the union doesn't accept the fact that compensation increases, class sizes, release time, health benefits and other contract costs maybe need to be reduced. Your union contracts have locked up your budget. When you spend 90 cents of your money on people, you just can't keep balancing the budget on the remaining ten percent. **The message:** Get some take-backs at the bargaining table and freedom from onerous restrictions in staffing ratios and class sizes to help fund compensation increases. The union is going to have to fund its own raise next year by unlocking resources tied up in its own contract!

Explain how you're allocating resources for results

Don't let the budget just be the J-90 form or a spreadsheet. Connect the pattern and priority of your expenditures to student achievement, school performance and employee effectiveness. Draw a clear line of accountability from budget line items to outcomes, results, achievements and positive gains for students. **The analogy:** Connect the dots to draw the public a picture about how you are investing their tax money wisely. Now is the time to prove that the educational product you are delivering has "value" to the stakeholders.

The budget is a blueprint and a schematic for your district. Show 'em the specs!

If you want to judge what a school district values and whether it is run well, just look at its budget. As a communicator you should always tie your spending patterns to your strategic plans. **The tip:** use the strategic plan as a lens for the reader of your board report, annual report or budget update. Tell them what you are hoping to accomplish in your spending patterns and then help them see that you are doing that inside the budget.

Make your numbers sing!

Use bar graphs, pie charts and tables wisely. Each one of these graphics need to have a headlines that explain for the reader what they are suppose to see in the graphic. Don't just give them a file folder heading like "District Revenue, 2007-08" Instead, use active headlines for graphics so the picture is worth at least 995 more words!

Some advice: If I only read the bar graph would I still be able to know your key message even if I didn't read the article in your newsletter? Graphics have to be able to stand alone and still tell a complete story.

Create a budget lesson plan

Don't expect your grassroots support to grow with only one watering, Use a drip irrigation system, a steady flow of information to build a knowledge base about the budget among key stakeholders. The more influential they are

the more you need to ensure that they “get it.” In January, the Governor’s Budget is released, School Services and the statewide organizations comment, and the stage is set. In February the Legislative Analyst adds her two cents and ideas. In March we have to make employee layoffs to balance the projected budget next year. In April we have a reporting deadline called P2 that determines our fundable enrollment for next year. In May we finalize our own budget and then wait for the state to give us the bad news in the May Revise of the state’s revenue projections. Finally in June and July we get the bad news about state funding. As you can see there are pre-determined “news holes” that you will need to be prepared to fill in this calendar. **A strategy:** Create a map and calendar of the budget process. Have the CBO give you a tutorial on when he/she intends to report to the school board on budget developments so you can anticipate what you will need to disseminate to your publics.

Be message driven, not number driven in your communication

Part a good communicator’s job is to put the big issues into perspective and context. How deep is this cut? Describe the trends in revenue and expenditures in ways that people can truly grasp. **A hint:** Attack stereotypes and myths about your budget (i.e. too many administrators, administrative waste, humongous reserves, etc.). Create a web site clearinghouse page that is topical, FAQ-based (frequently asked questions), and user friendly. Call it something catchy like “How we spend your money well!”

These are just few ways to make your budget reporting more effective. If you assume that budgets aren’t that interesting, then they probably won’t be. The budget message is the pivot point for a lot of what you do or don’t do in your district for students. It also demonstrates to the CBO and superintendent that you can be an indispensable resource it getting this critical message out and understood by internal and external stakeholders and audiences. Done well, this can one of your shining moments as a school communicator!

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