Keeping Budget Communications Effective and In Perspective

By Sandy Husk, Ph.D., superintendent, Salem-Keizer Public Schools, Salem, Ore.

Imagine sitting around a campfire with your friends on a summer night in a scenic canyon. A park ranger approaches and warns that a flash flood is coming. Would you stay there and talk about the various ways in which a flood could endanger you or ruin your trip? Would you talk about past trips that were ruined by bad weather? Probably not. Most likely, you’d move your camp to higher ground and resume your adventure.

In public education today, the budget is on our mind. But I think we run the risk of making the budget our obsession and slowing our forward progress on student achievement. As leaders, we need to inform our community and staff without paralyzing them with fear.

Use Values to Guide Budget Conversations

In Salem-Keizer Public Schools, we have found it helpful to begin by agreeing on the values that will guide us regardless of the magnitude of budget problems we face. In our district, those values are:
1. Minimize the impact on students;
2. Preserve jobs as much as possible;
3. Move forward in a way that brings us closer together as a community; and
4. Set ourselves up for future success.

District staff drafted these values. Then my top administrative team and I took them out to community meetings in each high school. During those meetings we asked for verbal and written feedback. We also used the Internet to educate and survey people who could not come to the meetings. The result was general agreement on the values. I believe these value statements have helped people remain focused on the students instead of dividing into factions.

Build Understanding with a Communications Plan

Next, we developed a communications plan to educate the public in real time. We provide updates when we hear something significant, not necessarily something definite. In the past we would wait for “solid numbers” or wait to “see what happens on the federal level” before we began sharing information with the public. Certainly, we don’t want to spread wild speculation, but we do want to take the public along on the rollercoaster ride with us. We want them to know
that we are all aiming at a moving target so that they will understand the decisions that are made and the timelines they are made under.

In our district, we have developed a communications plan to achieve the following goals:
1. Prepare employees and the community for tough budget decisions in 2011 and beyond;
2. Maintain district and community unity and focus on student achievement; and
3. Prepare the community and district for innovative approaches to education delivery.

It is important to note that budget communication is only a small part of our overall communications plan for the district. We will continue our primary focus on student achievement and community involvement. We want our district staff and community to keep up the important work, knowing that budget issues will be dealt with as we go along.

I think it is also important to remember that every problem contains an opportunity. Are there programs or services that your district keeps providing simply because you always have? Do you have redundant functions in your district? Unnecessary paperwork approval processes? This might be a good time to streamline.

As leaders, I believe we need to prepare people for possible budget cuts without causing undue alarm. Budget difficulties are unpleasant, but they are also another opportunity for us as superintendents to reinforce the value of our role as leaders.

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