Seeing Public Engagement Differently

By Jason Willis

The economic recession has had a profound effect on the ability of state and local governments to provide essential services to their communities—especially education. For example, California school districts are currently operating with approximately 14% less revenue than two years earlier, according to *School Finance 2009–10: A Budget Cataclysm and Its Aftermath*, a report published by EdSource in January 2010. Stories about increased class sizes, personnel layoffs, and dwindling support for programs outside core classroom instruction have flooded newspapers around the country.

Despite monumental investments in education by local, state, and federal sources, the public does not understand or recognize efforts to preserve as many education services as possible. For example, in the wake of the economic stimulus legislation passed by Congress in January 2009, a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll (Bushaw and Lopez 2010) revealed that more than 70% of Americans said they were not aware that any of this money benefited their local school community—when it did in fact benefit every school district in the nation. Respondents also indicated that appropriate funding for education continues to be one of the biggest issues facing the schools in their community.

What most Americans don't realize is that their public schools have been well supported over the past several decades. During the last 30 years in fact, spending on

U.S. education has more than doubled, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008). As stewards of the public's financial investment in education it is the school business officer's responsibility to ensure the local community is aware of how we are expending resources, how and what circumstances of the school district are changing, and how it affects services.

Gathering Another Perspective

I recently worked with approximately 100 community organizers engaged in school finance advocacy from across California. The purpose of the training was to deepen their understanding of California's school finance system, identify structural impediments to advancing student achievement, and consider potential solutions to ensure schools had access to equitable, stable, and sufficient resources.

Throughout the training, the community organizers shared their observations about a school district's duties and responsibilities to the public. In particular, they offered their perspectives on how we, as school business professionals, orient ourselves relative to educating stakeholders and the community at large about financial support for education, how we distribute resources, and what data we use to drive decision making about use of resources.

During our discussions, several things became apparent.

First, education stakeholders had little understanding of what influences the actions of a school district relative to the allocation of resources. Despite the mountains of academic, financial, or demographic data that is made available to the public, stakeholders seem unable to make the connection between that data and our decision-making processes.

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For example, the community members do not make the connection that since approximately 85 cents of every dollar a school district spends is on employees, when the school district needs to drastically reduce expenses, it is nearly impossible to do so without affecting employee compensation.

Second, stakeholders describe the finance office as difficult to understand, not forthcoming with information, and not open about the district's financial condition. This description may seem harsh, but it probably is based on a variety of factors, including communication styles among stakeholders, forums and opportunities to communicate this information, and, most important, a misunderstanding of information.

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This misunderstanding does not stem from the school business officer's reluctance to share information; rather, school finance is complicated and our responsibility to make it understandable and transparent to our stakeholders is difficult to carry out at times. However challenging, it is our duty as stewards of the public's money to make school finance more accessible, transparent, and easily understandable.

Third, since the beginning of the great recession three years ago, school districts have struggled to adapt to a different resource environment. This economic and fiscal crisis has forced school business officials to consider and ask more questions about the necessity of services. While many school districts have wrestled with these new circumstances, the public has been unaware and unaffected by these issues, for the most part.

In one sense, this unawareness on the part of the public is a testament to the school business office's ability to respond to the challenges of offering quality services in the face of vastly diminishing resources. The down side of this trend, however, is that it has not been until just recently that communities have started to understand the scope and magnitude of the impact that this recession is having on school districts and the education services they offer.

Embracing a Renewed Role

So, how can school business officials engage and inform the public about the challenges school districts face? Further, how can they leverage public engagement to help the public rethink and reinvest in solutions that benefit the students in our schools? Here are a few strategies:

1. **Make data public and easily accessible.** This is critical to building trust among stakeholders in the local community, and trust is vital when you must make difficult decisions about funding priorities. Federal and state governments have made a broad-based call for more transparency in how

resources are used, requiring not only details of how federal stimulus dollars are being used, but also requiring reporting of per-pupil expenditures at the school level. See, for example, the U.S. Department of Education *General Reporting Requirements—Section 1512* (www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/section-1512.html) and the California Department of Education's *ARRA Reporting and Data Collection Systems* (www.cde.ca.gov/ar/rr/rptingdatcol.asp).

School districts may use the state's basic financial reporting requirements as the communication vehicle for the organization's financial standing. This information is rarely user-friendly and is difficult to interpret and connect to the educational program. The school business official and other finance office staff should invest the time to translate this data into information that is easy for the public to understand.

Presenting budget data to the public and explaining how it drives school programs can build an atmosphere of openness and transparency in the community. Even the process of making budgets understandable can be transformative in and of itself. For example, the process to attain the Association of School Business Officials Meritorious Budget Award can be a formative experience for a school district that needs to convert the adoption budget into a simple, easy-to-understand format.

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2. **Relate the data to the audience.** Most members of the public do not deal with numbers in the hundreds of thousands, let alone the millions. For school finance data to make sense, it needs to be broken down to a level that people understand. Showing spending on a per-student basis is a start, according to the University of Washington's Marguerite Roza in *Now Is a Great Time to Consider the Per Unit Cost of Everything in Education* (2010). Presenting data this way can raise reasonable and valid questions about the direction of a school district's investments in services for students.

   Roza also notes that presenting data in terms of per-student spending can help identify the relative amount of money flowing to each school within the school district and initiate dialogue about what choices are in the best interest of students during tough economic times.

   Further, compare spending over time on a per-unit basis relative to the service provided. *Toward Effective Resource Use: Assessing How Education Dollars Are Spent* (Willis et al, 2007) cites numerous examples, including calculating the cost per mile to operate school transportation.

3. **Talk about priorities.** Discussions about use of resources take on a new meaning when funds are no longer available to support all school district programs. That's when conversations about prioritization are vital. Critical to making decisions about what programs take priority over others is knowing, for one, results of past spending on those programs.

The role of the school business official involves more than ensuring the school district's solvency. SBOs must be able to offer analyses about expenditures and the most effective use of dollars, to generate a nexus between the current configuration of resources and the alternatives that can help the district reach its goals. School districts and schools simply can't afford not to have this type of information and analysis.

Taking the Next Step

School business officials play a vital role in building public trust, engagement, and support for making the critical decisions that affect public education locally and nationally. By helping stakeholders better understand the complexity of school finance and by promoting transparency and accountability, school business officials can better ensure more effective use of education resources.

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