1D   Identify Communications Strategy

SUMMARY

Key Points

- A budget process should include a communications strategy to inform participants, stakeholders, and the general public about how the process works and why each decision was made.

- The communications strategy should include an overview of the budget process, stakeholder engagement, and an explanation of the decisions that resulted from the budget process. An effective communication strategy allows participants, stakeholders, and the general public to understand how and when the budget was developed, provide input during the budget process, and understand the rationale behind the adopted budget decisions.

- When implementing its communications strategy, the messenger, message, and communications channel will be slightly different depending on the audience. Thus it is important for a school district to identify its target audience and designate a credible messenger to relay the budget message. In many cases, that messenger will be the school principals. As part of implementing a communications strategy, participants, stakeholders, and the general public should be given opportunities to provide feedback to which the district must respond accordingly.

Related Award Program Criteria

- **Criterion 1.D.1: Communications.** The applicant can describe in the award application how it explains the budget process to stakeholders and why budget decisions were made. The budget document presentation should be consistent with this explanation.

Introduction

Transparency is a key tenet of any budget process. Stakeholders need to receive more than line-item details on the funding levels for the upcoming school year. A strategy to drastically improve student achievement will almost always require significant changes in how resources are allocated. A strategy for clearly communicating to the participants, stakeholders, and general public about how the process works, what decisions were made, and why is essential for inclusion in the budget process.

This best practice document describes:

I. Components of a communication strategy

II. Implementation of a communication strategy

I. Components of a Communication Strategy

Recommendation. The communications strategy should encompass an overview of the budget process, stakeholder engagement, and an explanation of the decisions that resulted from the budget process. The recommended components include the following:

- **Process Overview:** Almost without fail, an organization will never be able to accommodate all requests for additional resources and many stakeholders will discover that not all their funding requests were fulfilled. Compromise is required in every budget process and a district needs to demonstrate that the budget process is an accessible and transparent one. As such, a district should describe how it develops its budget, including key dates and deadlines, how decisions will be made, and the process through which the public can provide input. A district should also communicate at the outset what principles and strategic priorities will guide the budget process. A mission statement, vision statement, values statement,[1] or "Theory of Action"[2] can each be helpful in clarifying and crystalizing the principles and priorities that will guide the budget process. Each of those items should link to a set of goals and targeted improvements in performance.[3] The budget process also should feature information about performance history to make the need for change clear.

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** A district should develop methods to solicit stakeholder input as part of the budget process. A stakeholder-engagement process should be designed with a clear understanding of the challenge or problem that stakeholder

engagement is intended to help address.[4] The design of the stakeholder-engagement process should then follow that purpose. For example, if the purpose is to inform the public about decisions that have been made or about changes in policies, resources, or programs, then informing the public and maintaining transparency about decisions may be sufficient. In this case, the design of stakeholder engagement should aim to reach a large number of people, including specifically identified target audiences; use diverse modes and venues of communication; and ascertain the public's level of awareness about the issues.

However, simply informing the public of decisions is often insufficient to generate the level of community support necessary to see those decisions through to successful implementation. This is especially true when the decisions are controversial and/or make significant changes to established patterns of resource allocation. A process must be designed to produce decisions that address the community's needs and concerns, resolve disputes, and create alliances for advocacy and implementation. Design considerations for this form of stakeholder engagement include: making decisions in such a manner that stakeholders do not feel left out (for example, avoid rushing the decision-making process or delegating it to small, elite, or exclusive groups); emphasizing procedural justice to enhance acceptance of decisions, even among those with a different preferred outcome; encouraging broad participation, especially of key stakeholders; engaging in shared generation of knowledge and joint problem solving; and using conflict management and negotiation techniques, including consensus-building approaches that aim for win-win solutions.

- **Explanation of decisions.** Once an adopted budget for the upcoming year has been produced, a district needs to clearly communicate the outcomes and the corresponding rationale and how they differ from the prior years. The message should be led by a description of the context for the budget and the environment in which the decisions were made, notably the student learning performance targets that drove the need to change how a district allocates resources. This could include, for example, enrollment and revenue projections, changes in governing legislation, or outstanding liabilities (e.g., pensions). The major decisions made and their impact should then be presented in a way that is accessible to the non-expert audience member. This presentation should include a clearly articulated rationale for the choices made, a description of the tradeoffs that were considered, and the basic principles that guided the decisions.

II. Implementation of a Communication Strategy

Recommendation. Implementing a communications strategy requires: identifying the messenger(s); identifying the target audience and messages; selecting specific communication channels; and gathering and responding to feedback. The following are the recommended components in each of these areas:

- **Identify the messenger(s).** Responsibility for carrying out the communication strategy should be clearly identified. In addition to the traditional district leadership (board and superintendent), a district should enlist other credible communicators. Principals are often important messengers because they are closer to teachers and the community than the central district office. Principals also are in a better position to help teachers become effective communicators of the message to parents. Respected third parties/external agents may also be useful (e.g., external experts, parent groups, business and community leaders, union leaders, etc.).

  To reduce confusion and the potential for unnecessary conflict, the messengers should be provided with a limited number of key points to present and a plan for responding to questions.

- **Identify the target audience and tailor messages accordingly.** The strategy should identify target audiences to include teachers, administrators, staff, parents, and members of the community at large. All information should be available to all groups, but a

district should consider tailoring its message to the different parties (e.g., teachers and administrators may be more interested in programmatic detail than the broader community).

Often, it can be difficult for different stakeholders to appreciate the larger interest of the school system, compared to their more immediate interests. The communications strategy should attempt to make the system-wide rationale more apparent to all stakeholders. Below are some specific techniques districts can employ:[5]

- **Share information widely.** Make sure all parties are aware of the reasons that change is needed. For example, low student achievement in math might necessitate more resources for this area than others and if test scores are widely known, the decision to invest more in math than other areas may receive greater acceptance.

- **Share the benefits, not just the pain.** To the extent possible, link a reduction in one area of spending with an increase in another area that will positively impact the party experiencing the loss. Communication messages should describe and emphasize how resources are being directed to create the most value for the most students.

- **Budget simulation.** Broader stakeholder participation in a district-wide budget balancing exercise can create wider appreciation of the hard choices a district faces and may even generate some new ideas for balancing the budget.

- **Use funding formulas.** If district leadership can agree on formulas to drive staffing allocations ahead of the budgeting process, it can help depoliticize and depersonalize the process if cuts in staffing become necessary. The formulas are used to direct cuts as necessary, rather than singling out staff.

- **Create an executive leadership team.** A team approach for leadership that includes school principals creates a support network for delivering news about hard choices.

- **Engage influential outsiders.** Community leaders and other influential parties external to the district organization should also be brought into the decision-making process. These parties can provide both a basis of community support for the resulting decisions and a means of getting the message out to the community.

○ **Build from experiences with bond issues.** Many school districts that have issued facility construction bonds through public referendum have experience with providing financial information to the community. These experiences may offer valuable lessons, resources, or methods that can be applied to communicating budget decisions.

- **Select communication channels.** Most districts have developed a set of methods for communicating with different audiences. Given the importance of the budget, priority should be placed on the methods that afford the broadest reach possible. This may include digital/web-based communication, mail, "backpack" mail, and meetings. These communications should make it clear how more information on the budget process can be obtained.

Public meetings are an important part of the communication strategy. Meetings should be planned to encourage participation by all community members and be offered at convenient times/locations. For example, if transportation to school offices is a challenge for some community members, consider holding meetings in more accessible locations (e.g., community center, church, etc.). It may also be wise to combine budget presentations with pre-existing meetings that the target audience already attends (e.g., parent-teacher organization meetings).

- **Gather feedback and adjust.** Given that budget decisions involve trade-offs, some parties will not be happy with the outcome of decisions. It is imperative that attentive parties have a chance to provide feedback during and after the decision-making process. A variety of avenues should be available for providing feedback. At the same time, feedback methods must be carefully structured to provide useful input. For example, care should be exercised with forums that can be taken over by special interest groups at the expense of the broader community interest.

Once feedback has been gathered, a district must respond accordingly, adjusting processes or decisions where appropriate. Failure to respond to feedback can severely harm the credibility of the budgeting process. Further, it is important to adapt the communication plan to new and changing circumstances throughout the budget process so that the message remains relevant and credible.

Endnotes

[1] Alan M. Blankstein recommends developing mission, vision, and value statements as a prelude to goal setting because they help create a common understanding of a district's larger direction. See Alan M. Blankstein, *Failure is not an Option*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin-Sage, 2013).

[2] Nicholas P. Morgan and Nathan Levenson, "Theories of Action: Aligning Priorities and Resources," *The District Management Journal 8* (Fall 2011).

[3] Best Practice in School Budgeting, 2A - Develop Goals.

[4] Information in this section comes from John M. Bryson, Kathryn S. Quick, Carissa Schively Slotterback, Barbara C. Crosby, "Designing Public Participation Processes," *Public Administration Review* (January/February 2013).

[5] Adapted from Nathan Levenson, *Smarter Budgets, Smarter Schools: How to Survive and Thrive in Tight Times* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012).