

The Benefits of Budget Engagement

How budget simulations helped Syracuse City School District gain community input

BY CHRIS ADAMS

The Syracuse City School District (SCSD), accustomed to tight budgets and advocating to legislators for more funding, recently found itself in an unfamiliar position: It had more money than it could spend.

The extra dollars were due to an influx of pandemic federal stimulus grants plus staffing challenges that left more than 350 vacancies this past spring, from a normal district employment of over 5,000 people. Without enough staff, it was impossible to launch new programs, leaving \$22 million in unspent stimulus dollars planned for use in 2021-22 to carry over to the current school year. “We don’t usually have any money here in Syracuse, so we’re in this strange space where we have money, and we can’t spend it,” Chief Financial Officer Suzanne Slack said.

In response, SCSD set out this summer to gather community feedback on how to prioritize the uses of its \$157 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) funds, allocated over three years.

While these budget circumstances were unusual, what wasn’t unusual was how frequently SCSD’s leaders sought public input on their budget decisions. Rather than simply check a box in their budget process with an in-person public meeting that might attract only a couple of people, SCSD makes regular use of online budget engagement, in a variety of circumstances and across a broad spectrum of stakeholders—and gains significant benefits in the process.

These benefits include increased contextual understanding of how the budget works, greater trust built from learning about funding constraints, more accountability from district leaders in their funding decisions, and more empathy from raising awareness of the consequences of

budget decisions, such as how they specifically affect students, families, teachers, and staff.

The combination of budget simulation tools and broad outreach to increase participation in the exercises “has really changed things here,” Slack said. “There’s a very simple way to explain these numbers that are huge and overwhelming to the public,” she said, and budget simulations transform the engagement process so “it’s not a math problem, it’s an operational decision-making tool.”

SEEKING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The public expects a certain level of data accessibility, and those expectations are on the rise everywhere, from personal banking to federal taxes. SCSD is meeting that trend in schools through increased budget transparency—but while it is increasingly important to get the public’s input on the budget, Slack said, it’s also increasingly difficult. Before the district started

using online budget simulation tools, she had never had more than two people come to a budget hearing—in a city of 141,000 people.

One of the five largest districts in the state, SCSD is funded by a combination of local, state, and federal funds, with local and state funds appropriated each year from the City of Syracuse and the State of New York. Because it is one of the larger districts, the city council votes on SCSD's budget, and it doesn't need to be approved by a vote of residents.

While this might seem to make the jobs of Slack and Director of Budget Mary Habib easier, they don't want to gloss over budget engagement. Rather, they are strong advocates for it. "Really, it's all about the planning," Slack said, "and although the two of us could do our budget very quickly and very easily, tell the superintendent, and get approval, what really matters is that this is a budget for the people. It's for the kids in this community."

About five years ago, they started searching for ways to bridge the gap. One idea was to have a mock vote, with taxpayers coming out one day to vote on the school budget and share feedback, but it generated only a small amount of

feedback for a lot of effort. Another idea was a manual game played with small groups, which produced great feedback but had limited reach.

Then, in 2018, they started using an online budget tool to gather community input on the annual budget, asking residents, "How would you balance the budget?" and encouraging participation with the slogan, "Your voice counts!"

SEEKING IDEAS FOR FEDERAL STIMULUS MONEY

When the pandemic hit in 2020, making in-person meetings more difficult, SCSD added regular CoVideo chats to continue engagement with students, staff, families, and the community during the shutdown. They also used this platform to provide outreach related to the budget simulations.

Now, with stimulus funds carried over for the 2022-23 school year, SCSD wanted creative ideas for those funds, such as how to address learning loss, add more robust tutoring programs, and implement its plan for a virtual school. "I think those are new, big things that the public would be interested in," Slack said, "and I'd like to have the public voting on them."

For this effort, SCSD used the online budgeting tool to gather input during June and July on the best uses for its year 2 and 3 stimulus funds of \$91 million. The ARPA Planning Year 2 simulation invites visitors to consider 27 funding priorities, individually or by subcategories. A few examples of the 27 priorities include free dental clinics, student laundry service, classroom technology, computer network upgrades, virtual high school, and paid parent partners. If participants want to consider the priorities as subcategories, they can look at social emotional supports, acceleration of instruction, technology, physical health and safety, and professional development.

The district used social media, its website, and radio advertisements to ask: "Would you like to see the SCSD spend more on mental health supports? How about SCSD Office of Family Engagement events, gatherings, or giveaways? Should we offer virtual high school, or upgrade our district's technology? Would you like to see us offer free dental clinics, student laundry service, or added security screenings? We need your input to help us decide how to invest American Rescue Plan Act funding over the next two years! Take just a few minutes to select your top priority areas and rank them. Your suggestions will help shape our funding decisions!"

After participants chose their top 10 priorities, they could rank them by importance. The simulation also encouraged participants to enter comments throughout and add any additional feedback on the exit questionnaire. The aggregated data showed priorities for program planning and comments that could be mined for common words and ideas to further refine strategies for the funds.

Participants in the simulation generated 1,378 pageviews and 387 submissions, with a 28 percent submission rate. They ranked mental health supports at the top, followed by social-emotional learning curriculum, and access to resources for homeless students and families.

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SUZANNE SLACK, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER,
SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT



ARPA PLANNING
YEAR 2 SIMULATION
BY THE NUMBERS

27

Funding Priorities

1,378

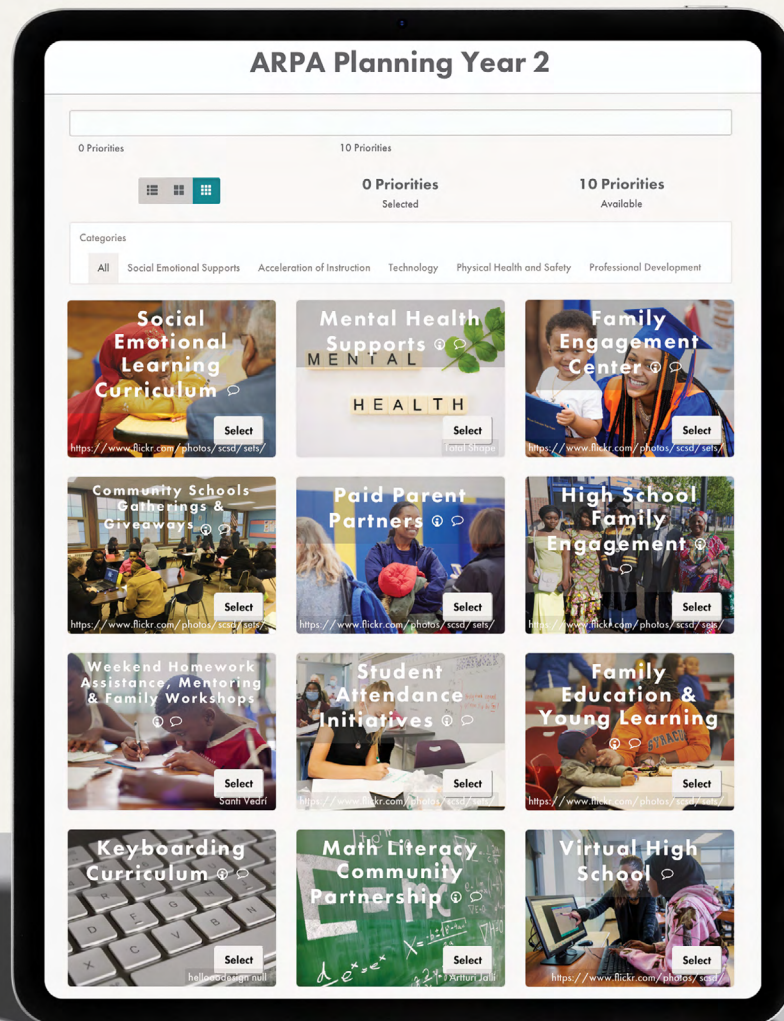
Pageviews

387

Submissions

28%

Submission Rate



POSITIVE IMPACTS FROM BUDGET ENGAGEMENT

While engagement with the annual budget is the primary way the district uses budget simulations, the district budget leaders haven't stopped there. Internally, they've used the district budget simulation with large groups of teachers and principals, giving them an opportunity to help shape the budget, taking costs and limited resources into account. They also brought the budget simulation to the social studies curriculum director to incorporate into civics classes and get a perspective from young people on how best to spend limited tax dollars—and in an interesting twist, they implemented participatory budgeting (designating a small pot of money that stakeholders can directly allocate) to help seven schools identify and vote on projects to spend \$5,000 at the building level. Participatory budgeting is now part of the district's civics curriculum.

Over the course of these different uses, Slack and Habib have identified these benefits of budget engagement for school districts:

Enable richer participation.

By providing an interactive online budget within a framework of ideas, participants can respond to a set of ideas and serve as editors rather than carrying the burden of creating solutions.

Iterate more easily over time.

Rather than using public engagement on the budget only to compare and critique data from one year to the next, participants are helping district leadership refine strategies and generate new ideas.

Gain qualitative as well as

quantitative feedback. While quantitative information is the first information gathered, qualitative information also yields a significant value, with the comments from participants carrying a lot of weight. For example, in a discussion on mental health services, comments indicated that rather than adding more nurses to schools, more social workers or psychiatrists/psychologists would have more impact.

Generate community empathy and buy-in.

In one example, participants gained an understanding of the way charter schools are funded, and rather than recommend more state aid to combat a shortfall, they instead searched for ways to trim spending. "That's a huge shift in what we've seen people do in the past," Habib said. Effective communication includes nuance. An online tool that reaches a broad audience and is interactive and visually appealing makes it easier for people to digest budget categories and share ideas and opinions.

Identify holes in the strategy. By using keywords to mine the comments on budgets, Habib and Slack can see what might be missing in programming strategies.

Develop civic-minded students.

By incorporating budget simulations in the civics curriculum, the next generation is graduating with more knowledge and skills as citizens who will vote and participate in their communities.

Empower internal decision-making.

Sharing tools with principals and teachers makes it possible for district employees to use them for different stakeholder groups to make their voices heard, which is more meaningful than top-down decision-making.

Reduce emotional reactivity. Rather than relying on a narrow segment of voices, budget simulation exercises help communities solve community-wide problems in constructive, less emotionally charged ways.

Ease long-range planning. Paper budgets make it harder to look far into the future, but simulations help demonstrate options and the results that could be expected from various decisions, such as preparing for major budget shortfalls from declining enrollment or allocating one-time funding sources.

With budget engagement now a regular part of the process at SCSD, Habib and Slack are looking forward to reviving in-person meetings for added impact.

"I am hopeful that we're back in person soon for these types of meetings where we get the community together to do a simulation together," Slack says. "But I will never give up on the virtual option because it reaches the masses." ■

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