

2D

Evaluate Choices amongst Instructional Priorities

SUMMARY

Prerequisite Best Practices:

- Best Practice in School Budgeting, 2C — Research and Develop Potential Instructional Priorities

Key Points

- In evaluating options, a school district should identify the instructional priorities being considered to increase student achievement, describe the options to decision makers, provide the concrete consequences of the choices, and engage the public in evaluating the options.
- The first step in evaluating a district's options is to clearly identify the instructional priorities under consideration. This is handled through research into leading practices, an analysis of the conditions the district faces in its own environment, and stakeholder input.
- A district will also need to describe the instructional priorities under consideration in a way that allows participants to easily compare the options in the decision-making process. Useful guidelines for accomplishing this are to limit the number of options presented, provide concrete analysis on the consequences of the choices, and categorize the choices by their potential impact (e.g., student learning, long-term affordability, feasibility of implementation, level of stakeholder support, and structure).
- A district should engage stakeholders such as the school board, school site leadership (e.g., principals), teachers, union/association leadership, parents, and the broader community in the decision-making process. A district should design the stakeholder engagement process to enhance the understanding of the problems the district faces and explore and generate potential solutions through deliberative techniques, such as small group discussion.

Related Award Program Criteria

- **Criterion 2.D.1: Option Analysis.** The applicant has followed a well-designed process to present options and engage stakeholders, as evident by the description of the process in the award application. Applicants can support their description with submittal of supplementary materials that describe the process.

Introduction

A school district faces an array of different programmatic, organizational, talent management, and revenue practices that can be pursued in order to increase student achievement. In some cases, the district may be able to develop a coherent and concise set of instructional priorities that it will follow such that further evaluation of options may not be necessary (see Best Practice in School Budgeting, 2C — Research and Develop Potential Instructional Priorities). In other cases, however, stakeholders may respond with alternative ideas that the district could follow, making it necessary to assess the individual potential of each option in order to select which ones will be reflected in the budget and which ones will not.

This best practice document describes:

- I. Identifying the options under consideration
- II. Describing the options
- III. Communicating that consequences do exist
- IV. Engaging the public in the evaluation process

I. Identifying the Options under Consideration

Background. The first step to evaluating a district's options for which practices to pursue is to clearly identify the instructional priorities that are under consideration.

Recommendation. A district should identify its options by considering the following sources:

- **Research leading practices and development of guiding practices.** The Best Practice in School Budgeting, 2C — Research and Develop Potential Instructional Priorities describes how districts can research effective practices for increasing student learning and develop instructional priorities. This work would produce a number of clear options.
- **Analyze the environment, goal setting, and root cause analysis.** Though a district's instructional priorities are a product of these activities, not all of the issues raised may be reflected in the instructional priorities. For example, an analysis of the environment might show a steady decline in the value of the district's property tax base and projected declining enrollment, calling for practices to adapt the district to a lesser resource base.
- **Seek stakeholder input.** As democratic organizations, districts will need to solicit input from a variety of stakeholders. Stakeholder input might suggest that certain ideas be taken under consideration.

II. Describing the Options

Background. The next step is to describe the potential instructional priorities under consideration in a way that allows the options to be more easily compared by the participants in the decision-making process.

Recommendation. Districts should follow the guidelines below when describing options that will ultimately contribute to a simpler and more successful decision-making process.¹

- **Reduce the number of options.** While more options will give the appearance of a more comprehensive decision-making process, it will most likely frustrate and confuse the participants. For example, a single option to "increase teacher collaborative time to an amount sufficient for effective collaboration" would be adequate to compare against other potential uses of the district's resources, rather than presenting a range of options covering different amounts of collaborative time.
- **Make the consequences of the choices concrete.** Provide definitive analysis of the consequence of the choices to make the options more real to decision makers. Districts should consider using standard classifications of consequences, such as potential impact on student learning, long-term affordability, feasibility of implementation, and level of stakeholder support. This will make presenting the consequences easier.

- **Categorize.** Categories make it easier for decision makers to absorb larger amounts of information. This guideline has two implications. First, options could be categorized along major types of practices. For example, options could be grouped into categories for improving instructional guidance, increasing professional capacity, improving the school learning climate, strengthening parent-community ties, improving school leadership and management, and strengthening the district's financial condition. Second, categories could be used to present the consequences of the practices under consideration. For example, rather than present raw data on the potential impact to student learning or on long-term costs, the consequences could be presented as "rating" categories: very high, high, medium, low, and very low.
- **Structure the order of the presentation to make choosing easier.** Structure the presentation of the choices to put the simpler, easier choices first. This helps to warm up decision makers and acclimate them to making choices.

III. Communicating that Consequences Do Exist

Background. Conveying the consequences of various choices may be the most challenging and analytically demanding aspects of evaluating choices. The consequences of choices can be divided into standard classifications such as potential impact on student learning, long-term affordability, feasibility of implementation, and level of stakeholder support.

Recommendation. Districts follow the guidelines below for describing the potential impact on student learning, long-term affordability, feasibility of implementation, and level of stakeholder support.

Examine the potential impact on student learning. The potential impact on student learning will be difficult to estimate with precision for any option. Therefore, a description of the potential impact on student learning should address the policy's alignment with the district's findings from the root cause analysis, the strength of any external research the practice is based on, and any actual experience the district may have with the practice already (through a pilot program, for example).

Consider long-term affordability. To make a significant, lasting impact on student learning, most education practices must be sustained over a multi-year period, making the long-term affordability of a practice a key

consideration. Examples of considerations that should enter into a description of the long-term affordability of a practice include:

- **Escalation in staffing costs over time.** For example, a new program staffed with junior teachers may become higher paid senior teachers in few years.
- **Termination of a supporting revenue stream.** To illustrate, a grant that sets up a permanent program, but only provides funding for a limited term, leaves the district to pay for the program out of its own funds after the grant ends.
- **Operating and maintenance cost of assets.** Purchases of new assets (facilities, equipment, etc.) will likely entail ongoing costs, such as maintaining the condition of the asset, replacing the asset when it becomes obsolete, or retaining staff to operate the asset.

Consider the feasibility of implementation. The feasibility of implementation speaks to the district's technical capacity to successfully carry out a practice. For example, if a new practice would require a prodigious amount of staff time and effort and staff is already stretched very thin, then feasibility of implementation might be low. Other considerations in implementation feasibility might include the degree of change a policy represents from the current way of doing things at the district and the level of technical expertise to which the district can access.

Level of stakeholder support. As a political environment, the acceptability of a practice to the district's stakeholder groups must be taken into consideration when weighing the different practices under consideration. This includes both stakeholder support for moving forward with a given practice, but also the political implications of not moving forward with a practice that has a great deal of stakeholder support. A district should have many opportunities to assess the level of stakeholder support for a practice, including surveys, public engagement forums, and one-on-one meeting with key actors.

IV. Engaging the Public in the Evaluation Process

Background. A district will face many pressures from the community. It is important that these pressures are addressed in the public engagement process so that the process is relevant to the public's concerns. While the pressures each district face will differ, some of the most prevalent pressures include:

- **Public pressure for practices that are less effective than the alternatives.** Sometimes a district will face pressure from the public to pursue practices that aren't as effective for achieving the district's goals as the alternatives. For example, public pressure to increase the number of elective courses offered may come at the expense of core courses or public pressure to reduce class sizes may divert resources from more cost-effective learning interventions (e.g., more effective professional development for teachers).
- **Pressures caused by changing demographics.** Changing demographics in the district might call for a change in how services are provided to the community. For example, increasing numbers of immigrant families (and the attendant increase in English Language Learner (ELL) students) might bring pressure for ELL tutoring, which might need to be weighed against pressure for advanced technology classes for other student populations.
- **Pressures for equity.** A district may need to make hard decisions on whether all schools will be treated essentially the same way or if a concerted effort will be made to provide more resources to schools with greater need (e.g., higher proportions of students living in poverty).
- **Pressures for job preservation.** Changes to the district's resource allocation strategy could have impacts on jobs. Job losses or the elimination of some positions in favor of creating other positions could provoke resistance.
- **Pressures for lower taxes.** The community may not be willing to support additional tax revenues for the district. Hence, funding for new programs to enhance student achievement must be found either through reallocating resources from existing uses or new revenue sources that the community finds acceptable.

Hence, a district should engage stakeholders such as the school board, school site leadership (e.g., principals), teachers' union/association leadership, parents and the

broader community in a decision-making process to select between the various options it faces and that addresses the community's pressures and issues of concern.

Engaging Funders

Some districts may have external funding bodies that have a specific interest in the district's performance and instructional priorities. For example, an overlapping city or county government might provide funding to the district. Especially where these funders exercise discretion on how much money to provide to the district, the district should consider engaging these funders in the evaluation process as well.

Recommendation. A largely unstructured public participation process often results in a "wish list" of ideas and budget requests from the participants and, perhaps, domination by unrepresentative input from special interests. Hence, the stakeholder engagement process should be designed to suit the purpose. Design considerations for stakeholder engagements/public involvement that are intended to enhance the understanding of public problems and explore and generate potential solutions include:²

- Develop approaches and small-group formats that can help participants understand issues and contribute to problem solving.
- Design processes for sharing information and engaging and exchanging views among participants to promote understanding and discovery of new options; help participants learn about each other's perspectives, the broader context, and possibly change their views; present information in various formats and from a variety of sources.
- Balance technical expertise and broader stakeholder representation.

Endnotes

¹ The research of Sheena Iyengar suggests that typically the opportunity to evaluate many choices is initially enjoyable to the participants, but results in delays, relatively low-quality decisions, and ultimately diminished satisfaction with the results of the selection process. Iyengar's research suggests the choice simplification guidelines described in this best practice. See for example Sheena Iyengar, *The Art of Choosing* (New York: Twelve, 2010).

² John M. Bryson, Kathryn S. Quick, Carissa Schively Slotterback, and Barbara C. Crosby, "Designing Public Participation Processes," *Public Administration Review* (January/February 2013).