

Public Advocacy



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All About the Money

Keep your community informed about your budget

WHEN IT COMES TO BUDGET

struggles and dealing with the public, Ronald Koehler has seen it all. As an assistant superintendent for Michigan's Kent Intermediate School District, an education service agency that serves more than 100,000 students in 20 school districts and 23 public school academies in the Grand Rapids area, his role is to be the liaison with local agencies and the business community.

"We have no control over our revenue," says Koehler, noting that Michigan uses a per-pupil funding system that is run by the state. "Half of our districts are growing and the other half are declining in enrollment. Since 2000, Michigan's cost of

education has grown by 15 percent, while school funding has increased by 5 percent, which is far short of matching the rate of inflation." He pauses and says, "I can go on."

At this point in the year, most school districts are navigating a new budget cycle that started on or around July 1, so it's natural to ask why we should talk about communications and money now. The reason, quite simply, is because it's always a good thing for the public to know how tax dollars are being spent. And, given the struggles many districts have faced due to cuts that date back almost a decade, it is incumbent on school leaders to paint an accurate and ongoing picture of the financial challenges they face.

SLOW RECESSION RECOVERY

While each state uses different formulas and methods for school funding, there's no question that many districts have struggled financially since the 2008 recession. According to a November 2017 report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 29 states provided less school funding than they did in 2008, and at least 12 had cut general or formula funding by 7 percent or more per student in the decade leading up to the 2017-18 school year.

"When you look at other states and the nation as a whole, and then compare what they're doing to yours, you say that Michigan should be matching Massachusetts' performance," Koehler says, noting that his state's education funding is just 60 percent of Massachusetts. "We say, 'Well, money isn't everything, but it's something and here's how we compare.'"

Battles over funding have led to teacher walkouts in several of the lowest-funded states, and legal fights are ongoing in others over how much it costs to provide children with an adequate education. A number of states have opted for formulas that are, in essence, variations on Texas' Robin Hood plan from the mid-1990s — steal from the rich and give to the poor — while pushing down expenses to the local level.

In California, Kelly Avants is part of an advocacy coalition that is fighting to rebuild her state's shattered school funding program. After years of draconian cuts that followed the recession, California moved to a new funding model in 2013-14, one that aims to get districts back to 2008 funding by 2022.

"The general population is hearing a lot of rhetoric about the great new

funding that is going to schools, but we haven't gotten there yet, and the state also has pushed down a lot of things to districts that weren't there in 2008," says Avants, chief communication officer for the Clovis Unified School District in California's central valley.

Avants says districts have taken on more retirement expenses, added "exponentially more" special education costs, and technology infrastructure that "wasn't there in 2008."

These things, she says, leave districts with the feeling that they "have to remodel the kitchen when you can't pay the mortgage."

"It's interesting, because we have a roaring economy at the moment, and yet we're still dealing with the effect of budget cuts that took place a decade ago," she says. "The challenge is that there is so much noise you have to get through to reach the public today, and when you're talking about a budget it becomes even more complicated and complex, so you have to look for a variety of ways to communicate."

BUDGET COMMUNICATION

So, what are some ways you can do just that?

No matter your district size, talking to civic groups, chambers, and the business community about how your spending is aligned to your district's mission and goals is a solid, proven first step. Engaging your employees and parents — your internal audiences — is also critical. Meanwhile, in board meetings, you should be explicit about identifying how every new purchase and initiative aligns to your vision for student outcomes.

And, as Avants and Koehler note, remember that the public won't necessarily understand the complexity involved in making these types of

"We've always felt that funding was something we should be constantly educating the community and our employees about."

—Kelly Avants

decisions, especially as they relate to staffing and facilities.

"One of our biggest challenges is that people believe if you have fewer students, then you should have lower expenses," Koehler says. "We find ourselves having to explain to people that if you lose 30 students from a 3,500-student district that it doesn't mean you should lose a fourth-grade teacher, because those students are spread out across all grade levels. You still have the very same expenses you had before."

In Michigan, Koehler finds himself "constantly making the case for a continued investment in our classrooms" by comparing the 20 districts in Kent to a corporation. He provides districts with talking points about funding and encourages officials to "have an ongoing dialogue with their community about the needs of their children."

"On one hand, we have a nearly \$1 billion corporation in our district, so we have to make the case that we're making wise decisions and doing our best to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars," he says. "At the same time, we have to communicate that, because of the cuts over time, our fund balances are precariously low and we don't have additional dollars to spend. It's a real tightrope."

Avants, whose district has 43,000

students, has a key communicator network and holds a state of the district breakfast annually for more than 600 community members to talk about the budget. The district also trains principals and classified department heads on what they need to know, and educates their staffs on school funding, staffing, compensation, and services to students. Posters are put up in teacher lounges that explain the budget.

"We can't just talk about it when there are bad times or going out for bond measures or personal tax. We have to integrate these discussions into all of our communications, identifying key points that are related to funding and keep hitting them. And hitting. And hitting."



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