Remaining Focused During a Budget Crisis

Last year, I had to face a new challenge: the economic dilemma facing our schools. The impact of our national, state, and local economic outlook on our students was foremost on my mind because our school system was openly discussing repercussions such as school closings, teacher layoffs, and program cuts. My concern was maintaining an academic focus and continuing to do what was best for students during an economically stressful period. I wanted to maintain a positive attitude within the schools, with teachers, and with parents and the community.

At the beginning of my administrative career, I faced a similar issue when I initially sought to garner support from the school community. I had to learn how to share my vision for the school, bring everyone together as a team, and establish strong relationships, all while increasing students’ academic performance. Both challenges helped me develop the perspective that establishing open lines of communication between the principal, teachers, staff, and community members helps everyone focus on doing what is best for our students.

Because establishing rapport with the school community is important, I developed budget-savvy committees and groups to help others understand how to tighten our in-house budget such as by cutting down on photocopying and energy use. My school created a letter-writing campaign to legislators and local newspapers in an effort to spread the word about saving our schools and the impact on students. Everyone was working as a team to increase awareness of the economic impact on our schools.

I recently thought about this issue while guiding my protégé through a successful first year as a principal. My protégé had to face these challenges while establishing herself as an instructional leader to her school and community. By using knowledge and training gained from my participation as a mentor in NAESP’s Mentor Program, I was able to encourage her to reflect on the following areas:

- How can I create an atmosphere that is positive and focused on students?
- How can I create an environment of listening and information sharing?
- Which budget line items can be cut that would have the least impact on student achievement?
- How can I empower the community to stand behind the school?

—I. Jane Cline

I began my first year as an elementary school principal with much excitement, enthusiasm, and anticipation. I quickly learned the true definition of the word TEAM—together everyone achieves more—as I began to count on teacher leaders to assist with many schoolwide initiatives. One of our challenges was to find the most effective way to do more with less.

In collaboration with my mentor, I developed interest groups to assist with reviewing the budget to determine methods for cutting back without taking away from students.

For example, classroom teachers made a commitment to help decrease the amount of money spent on substitute teachers. Teachers pledged to be conservative and limit absences; when needed, coverage would be provided by administrators or nonclassroom teachers such as the guidance counselor or inclusion teacher. We also began to look at different ways to save paper costs by communicating with parents electronically and including additional parent-teacher information on the school’s Web site.

Though we continued to face challenging economic times, and the district was considering closing the school because of low enrollment, I followed my mentor’s lead by remaining positive in all interactions and correspondence with students, parents, faculty, and community members. I didn’t want to lose sight of our students or instructional momentum. We all made a conscious effort to put our best foot forward and focused on our students’ needs. As a team, we continued to set high expectations, focus on student achievement, and grow as professionals through trainings, learning communities, and book studies.

I made a concerted effort to provide my staff members and stakeholders with timely district information and news articles about the budget. My door was always open and I maintained visibility in the mornings and afternoons for parents if they had questions or concerns. I empowered the school advisory council, parent teacher organization, teacher leaders, and community business leaders to assist...
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