COMMENTARY

Good People, Tough Decisions: Balancing the Needs of Students and Adults

by Nathan Levenson

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Balancing the Needs of Students and Adults

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Most school districts are facing another tough budget development cycle, and future years don't look much better. Superintendents and district leaders are again wrestling with how to balance the budget and still deliver a great education for all students. Many have shared with DMC their great frustration with a process that feels like getting blood from a stone, and they are fast running out of good ideas.

To help break the idea log jam, we often ask, "If you were creating a district from scratch, had no staff, programs, or schools, but the same (small) budget, how would you spend available funds?" Surprisingly, the ideas flow quickly. "I would have more Xs and fewer Ys; combine A, B, and C; and wouldn't spend a dime on Z." Many district leaders have a wealth of good ideas for doing more with less. The challenge is that most of the ideas are quickly ruled out as thoroughly unachievable. Why are these ideas not pursued? Nearly all of the ideas involve changes that help kids, but that negatively affect staff. Since

salary and benefits compose roughly 80% of most district budgets, it's no surprise that many big budget choices impact staff in a significant way.

These "good for kids, tough on adults" opportunities pit two powerful and reasonable forces against each other. School boards, superintendents, department heads, and principals all want to help children achieve. They value student success. However, these same people also want to protect jobs, respect and reward decades of service to the district, and have a happy and motivated work force. What type of leader doesn't value treating employees well? ➜

Organizational Values

As leaders and managers, we can all relate to the desire to support "our" people and see our part of the organization thrive. As caring leaders, we can relate to and understand how the following values take hold in school districts:

- Believing that staff members who have served many years in the district should be allowed to wait until achieving full retirement benefits, even if the position is no longer aligned with district priorities or the person's skills do not match the skillsets now required.

- Believing teachers "belong" to their schools and that transfers between schools should be minimized.

- Believing staff shouldn't have to split time between schools, even if this results in uneven workloads among schools.

- Believing good leadership means fighting for resources for one's school or department and preventing any cuts.

- Believing it is unethical to consider cost in evaluating programs or services because "if a student needs it, the student needs it."

- Believing that success means teachers and parents are happy and calm, and that change should be avoided because it causes discomfort.

- Believing "our" children are being served well if low-performing staff can be sent out of our building or department. (The consequences of these low-performers' working elsewhere in the district are outside our purview.)

- Believing that town residents, especially long-time residents, have a right to work in the district and keep their jobs during tough economic times.

- Believing student achievement data or program evaluation data cannot really measure effectiveness or success, but can alienate teachers and program administrators. ➜

These "organizational values" are reasonable, and anyone who has been in a leadership or management position can empathize with the desire to protect one's people and one's realm. For decades, districts have been able to adhere to both organizational values and student-centered values through an **improvement through addition** strategy. Change and improvements were often undertaken with new funds (grants, new tax levies, or state funding increases), while existing programs and staff often stayed in place and avoided disruption. As funds dwindle, districts are forced to shift to **addition through subtraction** strategies—every new effort means cutting an existing one. This approach pits student-centered values against organizational values.

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Navigating the Conflict: Understanding Values, Motivations, and Incentives

The first step in navigating this conflict is to acknowledge it, but not vilify it. It's not good versus evil, but one flavor of good versus another flavor of good. It is also helpful to identify clearly the specific organizational value in play. Is it respect for longevity, the desire to allow a staff member a graceful retirement, an obligation to employee residents, or a sense that teachers belong to a building? Ultimately, student-centered values must carry the day in order for districts to achieve their mission of raising achievement for students. But, steps can be taken to minimize the pain for staff. For example, phasing in change as staff retire or leave the district can reduce pushback; allowing all existing staff the opportunity to interview for a spot can ease the transition to outsourcing. When big changes require new skills in the central office, targeted retirement incentives can help put a new team in place while also respecting a lifelong commitment to the district.

But how can the conflict between organizational values and student-centered values be managed for the longer term? Understanding values and managing incentives will need to play a greater role in resource allocation decisions. Values cannot be changed—or at least not easily, for they are enduring beliefs acquired through nature and nurture. While values can seldom be changed, actions can be influenced through incentives. In the tug of war between organizational values and student-centered values, incentives (rewards and consequences) can move the flag toward students, even when organizational values are strong.

Unfortunately, many incentives in school districts are implicit and favor organizational values. Most districts highly value getting along with colleagues and fighting to preserve "my staff," and prefer across-the-board cuts over targeted cuts in order to avoid valuing some programs or departments over others. Student-centered values, by contrast, are often not rewarded. In quite a number of districts, the leader who pushes for change and uses data to evaluate staff is viewed as causing low morale and being cold or heartless rather than having the best interests of kids at heart.

Incentives therefore need to be shifted to fortify student-centered values. There are, of course, monetary incentives, but interestingly, salary has been shown to rank fairly low as a motivating factor in workplace satisfaction. Achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement all ranked above salary in workplace satisfaction. Non-monetary incentives can be powerful in reinforcing student-centered values. The following types of incentives, if done consistently and systemically, can help shift actions in favor of student-centered decisions.

OFFER RECOGNITION:

- Give thanks in private (hand-written notes are often saved for years)
- Highlight success at board meetings
- Showcase success for colleagues

CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY

- Evaluate based on student gains
- Make promotions based on achievement

PROVIDE SUPPORT

- Back tough decisions
- Have patience during stressful times
- Reinforce efforts during moments of doubt

GIVE CONTROL

- Give achievers a voice in decisions
- Allow greater autonomy

As expectations rise and funds shrink, the needs of students and the needs of adults will increasingly come into conflict, but by acknowledging and managing the conflict and shifting incentives, leaders can ensure that students get what they need and that the organization can stay true to its values and objectives. ◆

Moving from Values to Action

VALUES
Values are enduring beliefs, acquired through nature and nurture.

MOTIVATION
Many decisions require an important tradeoff between conflicting values.

INCENTIVES
An individual's values seldom change, but the tug of war between conflicting values may be influenced through incentives.

ACTION

Source: DMC