

CASE STUDY

Fairfax County Public Schools (VA)

Part II: Improving Budget Communications with the Community

by John J-H Kim and Garrett M. Smith

Originally published in *District Management Journal*, v.6, Winter 2011

Fairfax County Public Schools used a proactive, data-driven approach to strengthen its budget communications strategy and to use messaging that will resonate with diverse stakeholder groups and engage the community.

Fairfax County Public Schools – Part II: *Improving Budget Communications with the Community*

Several questions typically arise when thinking about community engagement during times of budget constraints. How knowledgeable and supportive is the community with regard to your district’s finances? What input from these stakeholders should you include in the decision-making process? What outside priorities should you reflect? How should you communicate with key stakeholder groups in the community?

| BY JOHN J-H KIM AND GARRETT M. SMITH

In 2009, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) in Virginia completed a major budget rationalization process, which yielded a reduction of approximately 4% on a per student basis from the prior year.

Despite FCPS’ significant effort to communicate and elicit input, feedback from the community and key advisory groups revealed several issue-oriented detractors and some lack of awareness about how FCPS manages the budget. FCPS realized the need to proactively include budget messaging in its overall communications strategy in order to foster better understanding of FCPS finances and to better engage stakeholders in future district fiscal decisions.

The Prior Year’s Budget Rationalization Process in Fairfax

Almost exactly one year prior to when the events in this case study unfolded, the Fairfax County Public Schools—the twelfth-largest school system in the nation—confronted a high degree of budget uncertainty. To cope with the unknown, Fairfax school leaders created a new budget planning process to account for various cost-cutting scenarios that might be needed. Seventy-five percent of the district’s budget comes from Fairfax County (the rest from state and federal resources), giving local taxpayers a larger stake in the health

of district finances than in many other school districts. In an effort to protect the programs and resources that make Fairfax County Public Schools one of the most successful districts in the country, Superintendent Jack Dale took several steps to design a budget rationalization process. First, Dale aligned the overall process with the School Board’s Strategic Governance Initiative, which includes the district’s mission and guiding priorities. This alignment ensured that the school board could continue to maintain the district’s high-performance. (For more information, please see “Fairfax County Public Schools: Rethinking Budget Rationalization” by Jack D. Dale in *The District Management Journal*, v.3)

Fairfax County Public Schools Fast Facts

- \$2.2 billion operating budget for 2010 (a decrease of \$10.3 million, or 0.5% from the FY2009 approved budget)
- 175,296 FY2011 total projected enrollment
- 196 schools and centers
- 12th-largest school system in the country
- 22,149 full-time equivalent positions
- One of the largest employers in Virginia



Nicholas P. Morgan

Second, FCPS created a process to gather community input on the budget while also educating the public about the budget process and content. Fairfax County Public Schools, in conjunction with Fairfax County government, held community meetings, employee brown bags and surveys, and online and telephone forums for members of the community to express their concerns. Also, FCPS put all budget presentations and documents online to increase transparency. In total, seventy-two focus groups were conducted with over 700 members of the public and employee populations in order to gather information about the quality of services delivered and to collect suggestions.

The third component of the process was to have the

Academic Achievement Facts

- 98% of all FCPS general education schools meet or exceed the Virginia Standards of Accreditation
- FCPS student achievement improved in all subgroups as measured by the 2007-2008 SOL (Standards of Learning) tests
- 94.5% of FCPS graduates continue on to post-secondary education
- FCPS' SAT average of 1664 exceeds both the state average of 1522 and the national average of 1511

leadership team review every program offered in the district. The team used a tool to evaluate the efficiency and value of each program, and had to recommend one of four actions: 1) Keep as is; 2) Reduce; 3) Restructure; and 4) Eliminate. All the programs were listed in one document that included the program name, cost, number of students served, indication of team support for various options, and final recommendations. The district's leadership team, which consisted of the superintendent, assistant superintendents, the chief financial officer, select principal representatives, and the school board clerk, met weekly to go through the programs one-by-one, to assess the overall value of that program against the district's priorities. These meetings enabled fact-based conversations to address budget constraints and operating priorities simultaneously.

As a result of this three-part process, the FCPS School Board adopted a FY2010 budget of \$2.2 billion, a decrease of \$10.3 million or 0.5% from the previous year. With growth in student enrollment, this equated to a 4% decrease on a per student basis.

Engaging Stakeholders on Budget Issues

On the heels of these difficult FY2010 budget cuts, Fairfax County Public Schools anticipates further budget reductions for the upcoming 2011 fiscal year. ▷

In the spirit of continuous improvement, FCPS recognized an opportunity to improve communications about the tradeoffs they would have to make in response to the ongoing budget challenges.

When FCPS evaluated community sentiment for this budget reprioritization, school leaders hypothesized a lack of awareness among key stakeholders about how and why the district was making budget decisions. Despite the robust process in FY2010, many parents and taxpayers still felt the district had made budgeting decisions without hearing community needs. For example, to cut a portion of money from the budget, FCPS had removed several bus stops; it became clear that the public did not understand the rationale for this decision and was not aware that these cuts helped support academic programs. The district needed to communicate better the positive impact that these cost savings could have on programs that enhance student achievement—the community’s main priority in Fairfax County.

The real questions were: How should the district improve its messaging strategy to communicate effectively with key stakeholders? How could district leaders inspire community champions for budget measures? FCPS realized it needed to alter its budget messaging in order to educate the community and gain community partners in championing district initiatives. Led by Barbara Hunter, Fairfax County Public Schools’ Assistant Superintendent for Communications and Community Outreach, district leaders compiled a plan to involve stakeholders and gather community input in the decision-making process. The district engaged DMC to help formulate the new communications strategy through research and analysis of stakeholder priorities and perceptions. Beginning with the important step of identifying key stakeholder groups in the community, the work plan called for a two-month process of research and fact-finding, analysis of insights, and crafting key messages for budget decisions (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

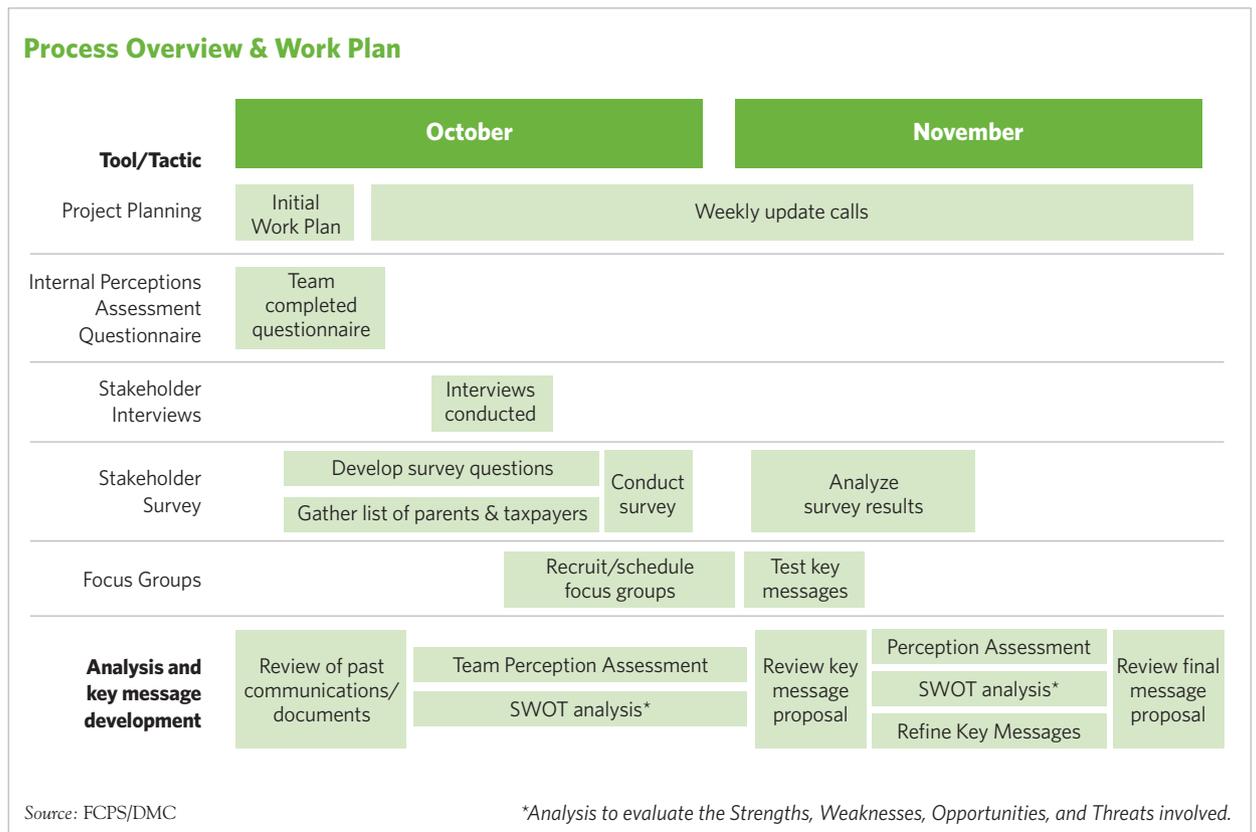


EXHIBIT 1

Sample Survey Questions from Online Survey Tool

11. Which options would you support to help resolve the budget deficit? (select all that apply)

- State Tax Increase
- Local Tax Increase
- Increased Cost of Services (increased fees for parking, athletics, extracurricular activities)
- Reduction in School Services
- Reduction in Other County Services

12. Are you aware of the budget cuts that were made last year?

- Yes
- No

13. If yes, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Last year, FCPS did a good job reallocating resources and making cuts, despite the large budget shortfall"?

- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree

Source: FCPS/DMC

The plan included four main stages:

1. Gather input from key stakeholders through primary research
2. Analyze research and generate insights
3. Develop and test key messages
4. Build and roll out a revised district-wide communications strategy

With a projected deficit of \$170 million in the coming fiscal year, Fairfax County Public Schools aimed to put forth a targeted communications strategy to make district cuts fully transparent and accepted by the community. Figure 1 shows the detailed tools and tactics used by the project team to build a revised communications approach over a two-month period.

Stage 1: Gather Input from Key Stakeholders

During the research phase of the initiative, the district needed to gain a more detailed understanding of community perceptions and concerns so that messaging could target these areas more proactively, with greater specificity and more accurate information. To assist in hypothesis development, the project team kicked off the research

phase by executing an internal assessment of how its existing communications were perceived. Members of FCPS' communications office answered questions about their perception of the district's image as well as suggestions for improvements.

Next, FCPS interviewed key individual stakeholders to capture how they perceived the district and what could be done to improve district communications related to budget initiatives. Interviewees were selected from groups with broad impact such as the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and the Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce, in addition to teachers and principals. The interviews revealed strong support for FCPS, especially around its accomplishments with student achievement. All stakeholders acknowledged the need to cut costs in the district, though there were mixed opinions on the district's approach to allocate resources effectively. Based on this initial feedback, it was clear that the district had an opportunity to improve its communications process.

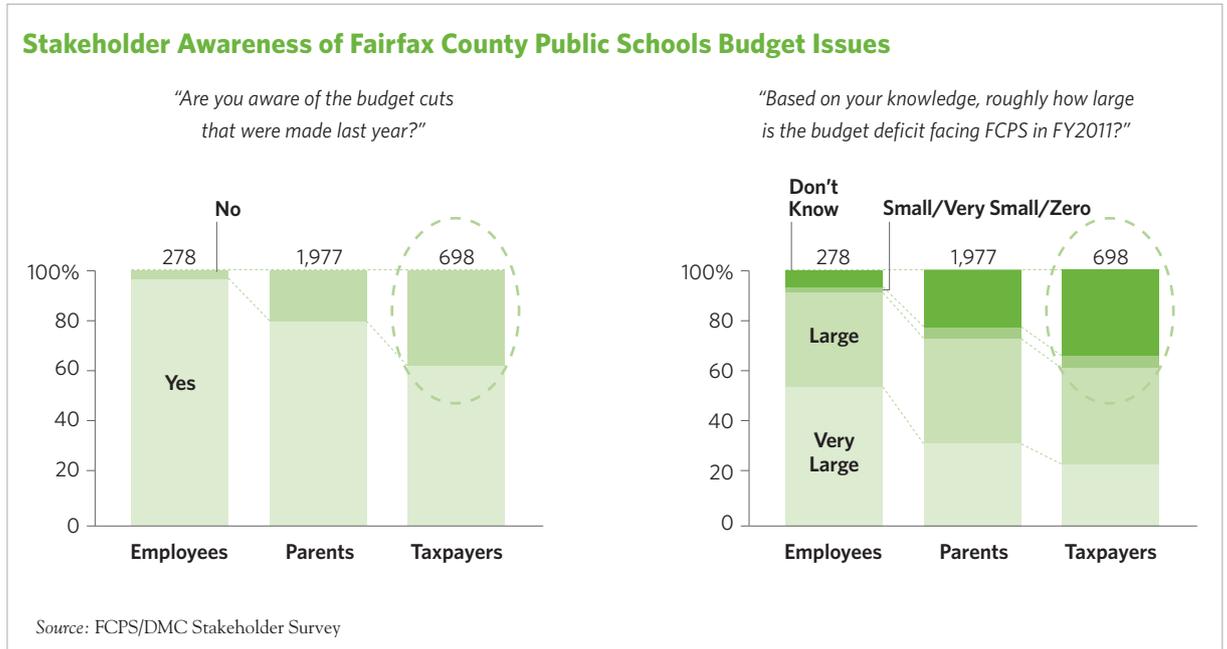
With hypotheses developed, an online survey to the community tested these qualitative findings in a broader, more quantitative fashion (Exhibit 1). FCPS recruited employees, parents and taxpayers to participate in the online survey to gauge the community's impressions of the district's budgeting activities. Sample questions from the online survey include "Are you aware of budget cuts that were made last year?" And "What options would you support to help resolve the budget deficit?" Two important response results are shown in Figure 2.

Stage 2: Analyze Research and Generate Insights

Survey results showed a generally positive view of Fairfax County Public Schools, but also an awareness gap regarding how district leaders handled the budget. As shown in Figure 2, close to 40 percent of Fairfax taxpayers said they did not know about the budget cuts made in fiscal year 2010. An even higher percentage questioned FCPS' resource allocation. These responses pointed to the need for more organized and fact-supported district communications.

Using the facts generated in the research phase, the project team focused on identifying key actionable insights that could be applied to a revised communications strategy. Figure 3 highlights one critical insight—that all Fairfax County stakeholders strongly consider student achievement to be the primary measure of district performance. ▷

FIGURE 2



This basic realization, which may not be shared by many communities, suggested that explicit connections should be made between all budgetary decisions and the potential effects or tradeoffs related to student achievement.

The research also yielded important data regarding attitudes towards the options for solving the budget deficit. A second major insight was equally important—and to many, surprising. While the community did call for innovation in cutting costs, which FCPS had done successfully in the previous fiscal year, half of the stakeholders surveyed supported some form of tax or fee increase to solve the deficit (Figure 4). To cut costs going forward, some stakeholders called for school programs to be cut, while the majority of community members advocated for the programs, citing protection of student achievement.

Among other things, the survey data also revealed that most Fairfax County taxpayers received their knowledge of FCPS budget activities through the news media—a sign that FCPS could further optimize its message delivery by media channels.

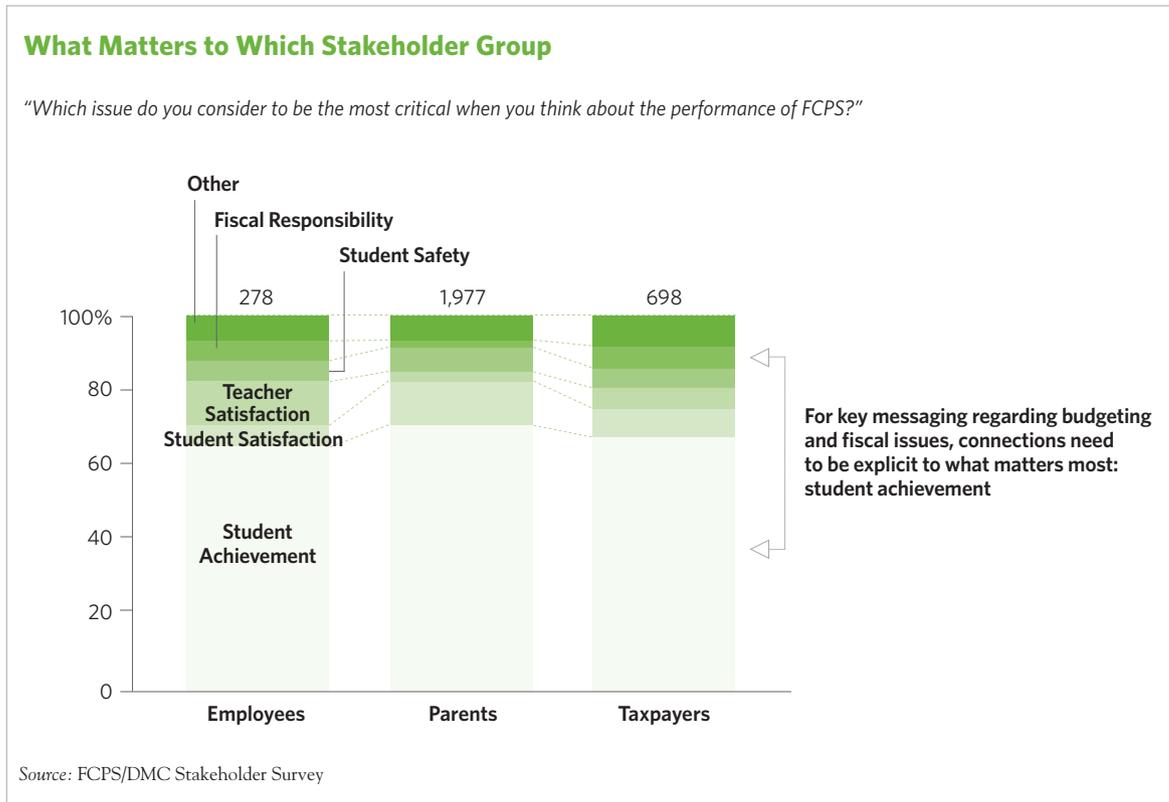
Stage 3: Develop & Test Key Messages

Using insights from the interviews and the survey results, the project team reviewed past communications and developed proposals for new key messaging themes.

The school district had to answer some important questions in order to create the right messages going forward: Which key messages resonate with each stakeholder group? Which messages would resonate most broadly across all segments? The project team focused on the tone, the topic, and the language around the key budgeting communications. These three parameters set clear objectives and boundaries for adjusting communications going forward. For each,



FIGURE 3



guiding questions were created. For example:

- Tone: Should we bias the communication to more emotional or more rational themes?
- Topic: Should we combine topics or focus on just one?
- Language: Should we choose generic language or more specific?

In total, eight guiding parameters were developed. FCPS then vetted the sample messages using focus groups comprised of individuals from the district’s main stakeholder groups—parents, teachers, and the business community. Separate 90-minute focus groups were held for three groups: the local business community, teachers, and parents. Each focus group had between nine and thirteen participants selected as a diverse cross-section of the stakeholder group.

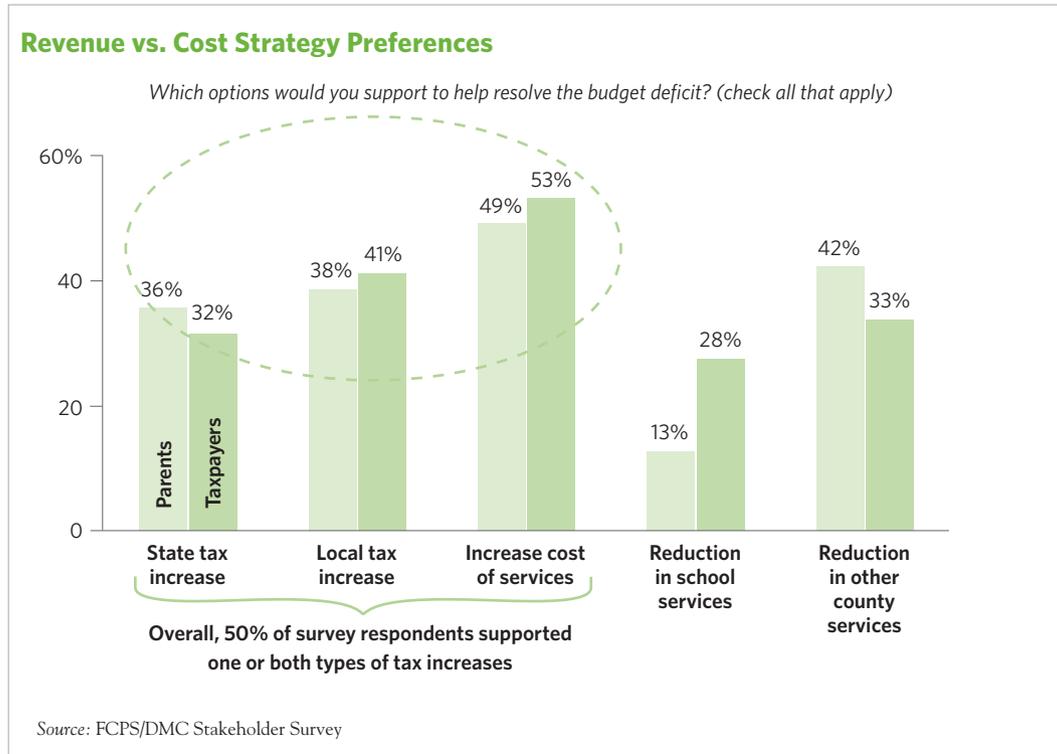
The focus group results confirmed earlier findings about attributes that define the district: good reputation, high achieving students, and high caliber teachers. In addition, the district confirmed that targeting specific

messages to each stakeholder group could increase overall awareness of its budgetary initiatives and its role as a school district.

Stage 4: Build & Roll Out a Revised District-wide Communications Strategy

Based on the research and insights developed in the earlier phases, the project team crafted a range of messaging options that targeted each stakeholder group. The district designed messages that were specific and personal, as well as ones that placed the overarching topic of student achievement at the center of all future communications (Figure 5). For example, FCPS stated the current issue at hand (a projected deficit of ~\$200 million), then established the possible result (how the lack of budget resolution could result in the deterioration of student program offerings and performance), and lastly, provided facts to engage that particular stakeholder group. FCPS also inserted confident, emotional language into its messaging to build a trusting relationship with the community. A sample >

FIGURE 4



message might read: “We have some of the best schools in the state—and the country—and I’m proud to support my district in any way to continue that achievement.”

The revised budget communications strategy, rolled out in December 2009, offers several methods to control how the district message is disseminated.

The district will:

- Focus efforts during the critical two months of the

Ask Yourself...

How Well is Your District Communicating?

- Who are your primary stakeholders?
- In planning your district’s budgetary responses to the ongoing fiscal crisis, have you adjusted your strategy to align with community priorities?
- Are you communicating budget cuts and resource reallocations effectively to your stakeholders? How do you know?
- How are your stakeholders receiving information regarding your district decisions? How much control do you currently have over the message being communicated?

budget process on audiences who will be most compelled to act—parents and teachers.

- Identify a coalition of business leaders who will also be compelled to act.
- Develop a longer-term strategy for taxpayers and business people that includes increased frequency of communications.
- Launch a new official FCPS budget communications tool, *The Bottom Line*, directed toward all parents, all employees, and information subscribers (Exhibit 2).
- Continue a robust web presence on budget facts, process, and news.
- Encourage school board members to reach out to PTAs, parents, and businesses and inform them of the budget situation.
- Develop new understanding among school principals of their role in communicating facts about the budget to their staff, parents, business partners; provide them with budget communication tools.

In addition, a PowerPoint presentation narrated by the Superintendent and posted on the budget web page

FIGURE 5

Sample Communication Language

"Keep in Touch"
(Sample)

As part of the ongoing budget process to realize savings in a tight budget year, Fairfax County Public Schools' (FCPS) Office of Transportation Services is proposing adjustments to the 2009-10 school year bell schedules that are projected to result in annual savings of more than \$4.6 million. These adjustments are separate and apart from the proposal to change school start times that the Fairfax County School Board considered and voted to reject in March 2009. The new adjustments focus on achieving efficiencies within the current bell structure, which the Fairfax County School Board voted to retain. The potential new bell schedules will not be implemented until and if the Fairfax County School Board adopts it as part of the FY 2010 budget process.

Revised
"Keep in Touch"
(Sample with new
Umbrella Message)

As part of our continued efforts to maintain the highest levels of student achievement in the face of the fiscal challenges of a tight budget year, Fairfax County Public Schools' (FCPS) Office of Transportation Services is proposing adjustments to the 2009-10 school year bell schedules that are projected to result in annual savings of more than \$4.6 million. These adjustments are separate and apart from the proposal to change school start times that the Fairfax County School Board considered and voted to reject in March 2009. The new adjustments focus on achieving efficiencies within the current bell structure, which the Fairfax County School Board voted to retain. The potential new bell schedules will not be implemented until and if the Fairfax County School Board adopts it as part of the FY 2010 budget process. **These savings will help us maintain the programs and services that support our mission of excellent student achievement.**

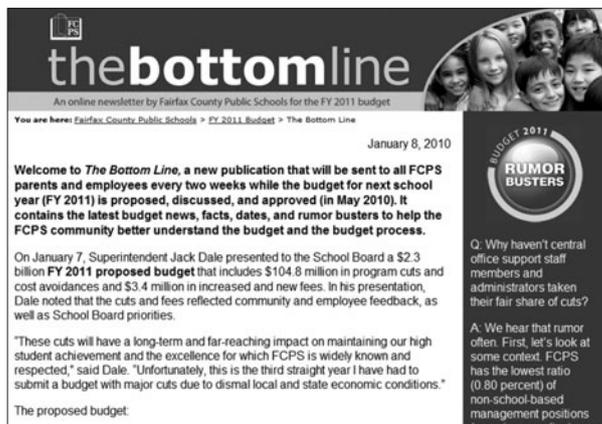
provides principals and PTA leaders with a ready-to-go tool to use in presentations to staff and parents.

Final Thoughts

Fairfax County Public Schools used a proactive, data-driven approach to strengthen its budget communications strategy and to use messaging that will resonate with diverse stakeholder groups and engage the community. FCPS is leveraging its insights,

generated from qualitative interview input and quantitative survey data, to cut costs effectively and in a way that is acceptable to the community. The district moved beyond what it thought the community was thinking to find out what they were *actually* thinking. Using the factbase of feedback, Fairfax County Public Schools turned strategy into practice through the use of tools that educate both the district and its stakeholders to achieve mutually beneficial solutions.

EXHIBIT 2



JOHN J-H KIM IS CEO OF THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. HE CAN BE REACHED AT JJHK@DMCOUNCIL.ORG.

GARRETT M. SMITH IS A SENIOR CONSULTANT AT THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. HE CAN BE REACHED AT GSMITH@DMCOUNCIL.ORG.