
Best Practices in School Budgeting

2C – Research & Develop Potential Instructional Priorities

Set Instructional Priorities Phase

SUMMARY

Prerequisite Best Practices:

- Best Practice in School Budgeting, 2A – Develop Goals
- Best Practice in School Budgeting, 2B – Identify Root Cause of Gap between Goal and Current State

Key Points

- To close the gap between its current and desired state, a school district should research practices shown to improve district performance to determine which practices might help it plan and budget for reaching student achievement goals.
- Some of these proven practices include: provide an effective teacher in every class and an effective principal in every school; develop systems to collect relevant data for decision making; adopt effective instructional and curriculum programs; offer additional instructional time for struggling students; and leverage outside resources.
- Based on its research into what has worked elsewhere, a district should identify a limited number of Instructional Priorities it may wish to adopt. An Instructional Priority is an overall approach for overcoming the challenges the district faces and achieving its goal. An Instructional Priority should be clear about its intent, should not be overly specific on implementation details, and should articulate the presumed cause-and-effect relationships between the actions the district will take and the outcomes for student achievement. To improve focus, a district should limit the number of Instructional Priorities it adopts to the most critical things it can do to improve performance.

Related Award Program Criteria

- Criterion 2.C.1: Instructional Priorities (Mandatory). The Applicant has developed a set of Instructional Priorities as demonstrated by the presentation of the Instructional Priorities in the Supplementary Materials. The Applicant can provide research citations and/or other research to support the development of the Instructional Priorities in the Supplemental Materials. Note that the Applicant does not necessarily have to use the term “Instructional Priorities” in its budget process or document – any term is acceptable as long as the underlying concept is met. For instance, the Best Practice document describes the “Theory of Action” as one particular format for articulating Instructional Priorities that has proven to work in school districts.

Introduction

After a school district has developed a set of SMARTER goals, identified gaps between the desired goal state and the district’s current condition, and performed root cause analysis on those gaps, it must find ways to close those gaps. The starting point is to research programmatic, organizational, talent management, and/or revenue practices that have proven effective elsewhere for improving student achievement. Such research helps to maximize a district’s chances of making meaningful improvements in student achievement and using scarce resources most effectively.

Based on its research, a district should identify the particular programmatic, organizational, talent management, and revenue practices that it might wish to implement (termed the district’s “Instructional Priorities”). Each of these Instructional Priorities represents an overall approach for overcoming the problems highlighted by the diagnosis of root causes. An Instructional Priority provides direction without specifying exactly which actions should be taken.

This Best Practice document describes:

- I. Existing research on proven effective practices that a district should consider as it develops its own Instructional Priorities.
- II. How to articulate Instructional Priorities.
- III. In Appendix 1, a sample framework for developing Instructional Priorities, focusing on the use of a “Theory of Action” approach. A Theory of Action is a particular method for developing Instructional Priorities.

I. Research on Proven Effective Practices

Background. A district’s budgeting process must identify potentially effective practices to improve student achievement so that these practices can be supported by action planning and budget allocations. This begins by starting the budgeting and planning process early enough so that there is time to perform research and consider new ways of reaching student learning goals. Research into new and effective practices must also be rooted in an understanding of where the district is underperforming and the root causes of the underperformance. This helps focus research and consideration of new practices on the areas that matter most.

Finding Other Practices

It is likely that a district will need to identify new practices beyond those documented here. For example, it may need a new scheduling practice or it may need to look for new revenue sources. Districts are encouraged to network with peers, consult professional journals and associations, and take other steps to find solid ideas where they are needed.¹

Recommendation. This document describes a number of practices that have been proven effective by professional researchers. Readers are encouraged to consult the endnotes for citations. The GFOA recommends that districts reflect on these practices and determine the role that they might play in the district’s plan and budget for improving student achievement.

Provide an Effective Teacher in Every Class & an Effective Principal in Every School

Teachers are the most important element in a student’s learning experience at school² and principals are also a critical element in the student’s learning experience.³ Hence, top talent is required to achieve the best possible gains in student achievement. The practices below have been shown to support teacher and principal effectiveness.

- **Manage talent carefully.** Ensuring a high quality teaching staff starts with recruiting from effective talent training institutions and organizations and offering competitive compensation. Districts also should find ways to “stage test” applicants before hiring them as full-time staff. Summer school, substitute teaching, and/or student teaching provide such opportunities.⁴ Additionally, districts must continue to manage the quality of their workforce after the initial hire; examples include performance appraisals, feedback systems, and

What Else Works?

The What Works Clearing House (www.ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc) and the Best Evidence Encyclopedia (www.bestevidence.org) identify curriculum programs in many subject areas that have significant and positive learning effects.

distributing teacher talent among schools fairly.⁵ Policies for tenure, promotion, pay, and dismissal using effective metrics from new teacher and principal evaluation systems should also be in place.⁶

- **Provide time for teachers to work and plan collaboratively.** According to school researcher Alan Blankstein, “central to the success of high-achieving schools is a collaborative culture focused on teaching and learning. This culture supports regular meetings of teachers who share responsibility for assessing needs and developing solutions that address all students’ learning.”⁷ Hence, providing the resources for teachers to work collaboratively should be a central part of a district’s improvement strategy. Researcher-recommended minimums for collaborative time range from 90 total minutes per week⁸ to three 45-minute periods per week.⁹ The time can be used for a variety of purposes, including curriculum planning, professional practice and study forums, developing teaching strategies, or peer observation.
- **Professional development makes a real contribution to teacher quality.** School researcher Karin Chenoweth points out that although “just about all teachers have been subjected to professional development in some form or another... the emphasis on the quality of professional development is what distinguishes [high performing schools].”¹⁰ However, quantity does not equate to quality in professional development. High-quality professional development exhibits the following characteristics:
 - Training is centered on the curriculum to be taught. The training is based on the curriculum and instructional materials created by collaborative teams (see above). The training is also based on the analysis of student performance data, and is linked to larger instructional improvement strategy for the district or school.
 - Dedicated instructional coaches work with teams of teachers to get new instructional practices embedded into classrooms.
 - New hires (both new and experienced teachers) are trained in essential skills.

Data Collection and Analysis

The foundation for good decision making is good data. A district should develop systems to collect relevant and timely data, and the district should create the capacity among staff to successfully analyze and use the data for decision making.

With respect to data collection methods, a district should develop methods to perform diagnostic, formative/short-cycle (i.e., feedback), and summative (i.e., review) assessments, with formative/short-cycle assessments perhaps being the most important because they provide the most immediate feedback.¹¹ While standardized test scores can be useful, districts and teachers should track a broader set of data to get a more complete picture of performance. These data could include: absentee rates; dropout rates, suspension and disciplinary rates; report card grades; high school graduation rates; measures of college and career readiness (e.g., SAT/ACT scores, percent of children taking advanced placement courses); and demographic and socioeconomic information. Surveys and observations are also useful for capturing human judgments and opinions that may not be included in formal record keeping.¹²

Even the most robust data collection system will fail to make an impact if the data are not used correctly to make decisions. Hence, training and capacity building to use data are essential. Data analysis is particularly powerful when it takes place in collaborative, team settings where staff analyze student work together based on common assessments or assignments.¹³

Adopt Effective Instructional and Curriculum Programs

According to school researchers Allan Odden and Lawrence Picus, “most improving schools adopt new curriculum programs and over time identify a set of effective instructional practices to implement the new program.”¹⁴ Further, specific curriculum programs may have much higher impacts on student learning than other curriculum programs and other educational reforms.¹⁵ Examples of effective practices in instructional and curriculum design include:

- **Use common instruction.** Districts should use a common curriculum for core subjects (e.g., reading, science, math) across all schools in the district. A common curriculum facilitates the ability of teachers to work collaboratively and to share experiences and materials.
- **Follow National Reading Panel guidelines.** The National Reading Panel (NRP) was formed by the federal government to assess the status of research-based knowledge about reading, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching students to read. The NRP identified a number of instructional strategies that are very promising for teaching students with reading difficulties.¹⁶
- **Be strategic and intentional about core and elective classes.** While elective classes are an important, enriching experience for students, districts must be cautious that the well-intended desire to offer such classes does not crowd out time or money for core classes. For example, researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education calculated the cost per-pupil to offer core and elective courses at one district and found that per-pupil staffing costs averaged \$512 per elective course, but only \$328 per math class.¹⁷ Districts should understand how resources are allocated between core and elective courses and make sure that this allocation is a result of strategic and intentional decision making.

Strategy and Implementation?

Readers may have noticed the absence of the word “strategy” to label the practices described in this document. This is because a practice such as “following National Reading Panel guidelines” is not a strategy. It is only a strategy when it addresses a root cause of underperformance at a particular district or school and when it is accompanied by the necessary action plans and resources to implement the practice. The other Best Practices in School Budgeting describe how practices become implementable strategies through the budget process.

Kids Who Struggle Get Additional Instructional Time

According to the nonprofit Education Resource Strategies, “if schools have no choice other than special education for struggling learners, students may be over-diagnosed into this expensive model, one that may not be well suited to providing accelerated academic instruction.”¹⁸ Therefore, districts should devote resources to providing extra attention to struggling students as a more cost and academically effective alternative.¹⁹ Response to intervention (RTI) is one highly regarded approach to providing “just in time” intervention. RTI models emphasize ongoing identification and response to learning needs of struggling students before they are placed into special education programs. In an RTI model, student learning is continuously monitored and interventions are continuously refined based on the student’s learning response.²⁰ Some of the options for providing additional instructional time for students who are identified as in need of assistance include: individual or small group tutoring, before and after school supplementary classes, and summer school.

Leverage Outside Resources

Engagement with parents and the community is an important ingredient for student success. It is within a school district’s power to increase the level of parental and community engagement.²¹ For example, the National PTA promulgates national standards for family involvement programs that can be reflected in how districts run their budgeting process. There are also many opportunities to work with community groups or nonprofits that can extend and enhance the programs offered to students.²²

Not all Leading Practices have a Relation to the Budget

Not all characteristics of high-performing schools will necessarily have a tight link with the budget process. For example, Karen Chenoweth cites a number of features of high-performing schools that would not have close relationship with the budget process, such as maximizing the use of the time students have in school, establishing an atmosphere of mutual respect between all members of the learning community, and building sustainable leadership capacity and trust.²³

II. Articulate Instructional Priorities

Background. Based on its research, a district needs to articulate its own Instructional Priorities that will guide action planning and budget allocations.²⁴ A district’s Instructional Priorities are an overall approach for overcoming the problems highlighted by a district’s diagnosis of root causes. An Instructional Priority provides direction without specifying exactly the action steps to be taken. Note that in a budgeting process where much budgetary decision-making authority has been given to individual school sites, it would be necessary for each school site to develop its own Instructional Priorities.

Recommendation. Districts can use a variety of formats and approaches to developing Instructional Priorities, but the GFOA recommends that Instructional Priorities should have the following characteristics, regardless of format:

- **Clear about intent.** The district should be clear about how each Instructional Priority it develops will improve student achievement. This clarity of intent will be helpful in the future if the district needs to prioritize the Instructional Priorities against each other.
- **Should not be overly specific on implementation details.** Leaving out the implementation details allows decision makers to more easily consider the bigger picture of how various Instructional Priorities might fit together or conflict. Also, it prevents the process of developing Instructional Priorities from becoming bogged down in disagreements over implementation details. Implementation details can be settled later in the planning and budgeting process.
- **Articulates presumed cause-and-effect relationships.** An Instructional Priority should describe the assumed mechanism by which it will help the district meet its goals. A shared, explicit understanding of the assumed cause-and-effect relationship at work forms a powerful foundation for budgeting as it becomes the basis for deciding which uses of the district’s limited funds have the most potential.²⁵
- **Limited in number.** A school district needs to maintain focus when planning to improve student achievement. Too many Instructional Priorities will dilute this effort.

See Appendix 1 for a description of a Theory of Action approach to developing Instructional Priorities.

Endnotes

¹ William D. Eggers and Shalabh Kumar Singh, *The Public Innovator’s Playbook* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School/Deloitte, 2009).

² Allan R. Odden and Lawrence O. Picus, *School Finance: A Policy Perspective*, 5th Ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2014). The authors cite a number of researchers, particularly Williams Sanders and June Rivers, “Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement,” *Research*

Progress Report (University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center. 1996); Thomas Kane and Douglas Staiger, *Estimating Teacher Impacts on Student-Achievement: An Experimental Evaluation* (NBER working paper #14601, December 2008); Jonah Rockoff, "The Impact of Individual Teachers on Student Achievement: Evidence from Panel Data," *American Economic Review* 94, no. 2 (2004).

³ In a 2010 Wallace Foundation survey, school and district administrators, policymakers, and others identified principal leadership as among the most pressing matters on a list of issues in public school education. Teacher quality stood above everything else, but principal leadership came next, outstripping other subjects, including dropout rates, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education, student testing, and preparation for college and careers. See Linda Simkin, Ivan Charner, and Lesley Suss, *Emerging Education Issues: Findings from the Wallace Foundation Survey*, prepared for The Wallace Foundation by the Academy for Educational Development, unpublished (2010), 9-10.

⁴ These are examples of practices followed by high-performing districts, as described by Karin Chenoweth, *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2010).

⁵ Many researchers have found that inequitable distribution of teacher talent between schools is often a problem in school districts, where veteran teachers are over-represented in certain schools (typically the ones with student populations that are considered easier to teach). See for example Marguerite Roza, *Educational Economics: Where Do School Funds Go?* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2010).

⁶ Researchers Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider point out that "a school that tolerates manifest gross incompetence in a few teachers can be highly corrosive to the collective efforts toward improvement being made by others." See Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

⁷ Alan Blankstein's views are supported by other researchers including Odden and Picus, and Chenoweth. Blankstein also cites a number of other sources. See Blankstein, *Failure is Not an Option* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin-Sage, 2013).

⁸ "School Design: Leveraging Talent, Time, and Money" (Watertown, MA: Educational Resource Strategies).

⁹ Allan R. Odden, *Improving Student Learning When Budgets are Tight* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin-Sage, 2012).

¹⁰ Chenoweth, *It's Being Done*.

¹¹ Blankstein, *Failure is Not an Option*.

¹² For example, districts may wish to survey students on their views of the academic environment of their schools or on perceptions of safety in the schools.

¹³ Blankstein, *Failure is Not an Option*.

¹⁴ Odden and Picus, *School Finance*.

¹⁵ According to the views of Grover Whitehurst, former director of the Institute of Educational Sciences. See Grover J. Whitehurst, *Don't Forget Curriculum* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2009).

¹⁶ The NRP prepared the results of its research in two reports and a video titled, "Teaching Children to Read." See www.nationalreadingpanel.org.

¹⁷ The researcher's work suggests that these findings are not anomalous, but represent a common pattern. See Marguerite Roza, "Now is a Great Time to Consider the Per-Unit Cost of Everything in Education," in *Stretching the School Dollar*, ed. Frederick M. Hess and Eric Osberg (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2011).

¹⁸ "School Design," Educational Resource Strategies.

¹⁹ This strategy is supported by a number of school researchers, including Educational Resource Strategies, Chenoweth, Odden, and others.

²⁰ Description of RTI taken from "School Design," Educational Resource Strategies. Note that response to intervention is sometimes also abbreviated RtI or RTI to denote different approaches to response to intervention. GFOA uses "RTI" in a generic sense and does not advocate for one particular approach over another.

²¹ For a fuller description of how to engage the community in school activities, see Blankstein, *Failure is Not an Option*.

²² For example, at one school a partnership with the nonprofit organization provided a trained coach who managed six periods of recess and physical education each day. Previously, special education teachers had staffed these periods. As a result of the partnership, the school improved the quality and reduced the cost of valuable physical activity time for young students and better deployed special education teachers to focus on their specialties. Taken from Chris Gabrieli, “TIME – It’s Not Always Money,” *Educational Leadership* (January 2012).

²³ Chenoweth, *It’s Being Done*.

²⁴ The concept and definition of an Instructional Priorities are adapted from Richard Rumelt’s concept of a “guiding policy.” See Richard P. Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why it Matters* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).

²⁵ This idea is a more recent entry into public-sector budgeting, but has been supported by the success of budgeting methods such as budgeting for outcomes.

Appendix 1

Theory of Action as a Framework for Instructional Priority Development

This appendix provides a description and example of a Theory of Action approach to developing Instructional Priorities. This illustration is not intended to insist that districts use a Theory of Action approach, but is described here because it has proven successful in school district settings and because it conforms to the criteria for a good Instructional Priority described in the Best Practice.

A Theory of Action is a set of interrelated causal statements that describe practices that improve instructional processes and student performance, over time, at scale. The Theory of Action should state what a district believes to be the prime drivers of improved student learning and, when written properly, provides the district with a testable hypothesis about how improvements in student learning will occur. A Theory of Action creates a clear linkage between the district's vision and mission to the instructional activities in the classroom. Developing a Theory of Action also requires district leaders to think about how different ideas to improve student achievement fit together (or don't fit!) to form a coherent whole. Cohesion is important because cohesive strategies reinforce each other, while unconnected strategies do not provide this same synergy and may even work against each other. Hence, over time, a Theory of Action allows for improved decision making, resource allocation, and discontinuation of non-core or counterproductive activities.

The development of a Theory of Action starts by articulating what the key stakeholders in the district currently believe about student performance and how to improve it. This step may never have occurred before and it is possible that very different and conflicting beliefs will be expressed. Formulating a common belief about what works to improve student achievement requires a series of conversations, informed by research on practices that have been proven effective. After a common set of beliefs has been formed, the district has a basis for examining different potential uses of resources and identifying where resources can and should be used more effectively.

Ideally, a district will have a single Theory of Action. A Theory of Action could be framed around different practices. Here are a few examples of Theories of Action for different topical areas:

- **Reading.**¹ If all students read and comprehend at grade level, then they will be able to master all other learning. If the district provides training, support, and frequent assessment, the district will know who needs what type of support, and consequently all teachers will become skilled teachers of reading. If all teachers are skilled teachers of reading, then all children will learn to read. If some students continue to struggle to read, we will not accept some students being left behind.
- **Human capital.**² If we find the best and brightest educators to lead our schools, give these leaders and their teachers the tools to do their jobs well, and make the leaders responsible for the success or failure of students, then they will create excellent schools that ensure high levels of student performance for all students.
- **Curriculum.**³ If we set clear, high expectations for student learning; provide uniform curricula, instructional materials, and lesson plans; and hold schools accountable for implementation, then student performance will improve.

Of course, there are many levers a district must push and pull to achieve its desired performance goals, but having a single Theory of Action provides a clear focus for where the district will concentrate its resources. That said, the budget process could benefit by having a small number of Instructional Priorities that are subordinate to the Theory of Action and that cover topics not touched upon by the Theory of Action, but which the district's root cause analysis suggest might play an important role in helping the district to achieve its goals. Hence, resource allocation could be guided by the following three-tier framework:

1. **Top Priority:** Spending aligned with Theory of Action.
2. **Secondary Priority:** Spending aligned with other Instructional Priorities.
3. **Tertiary Priority:** Spending on everything else.

Instructional Priorities beyond the Theory of Action could be suggested by two main sources. The first source is the discussion that led to creating the district's Theory of Action – important practices may have been raised in the discussion that didn't make it into the final Theory of Action. The second potential source is the district's root cause analysis. The root cause analysis may have raised additional problems that were not addressed by the Theory of Action.

Endnotes

¹ Nathan Levenson, *Smarter Budgets, Smarter Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012).

² Rachel Curtis, *Strategy in Action: How School Systems Can Support Powerful Learning and Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009).

³ Levenson, *Smarter Budgets, Smarter Schools*.