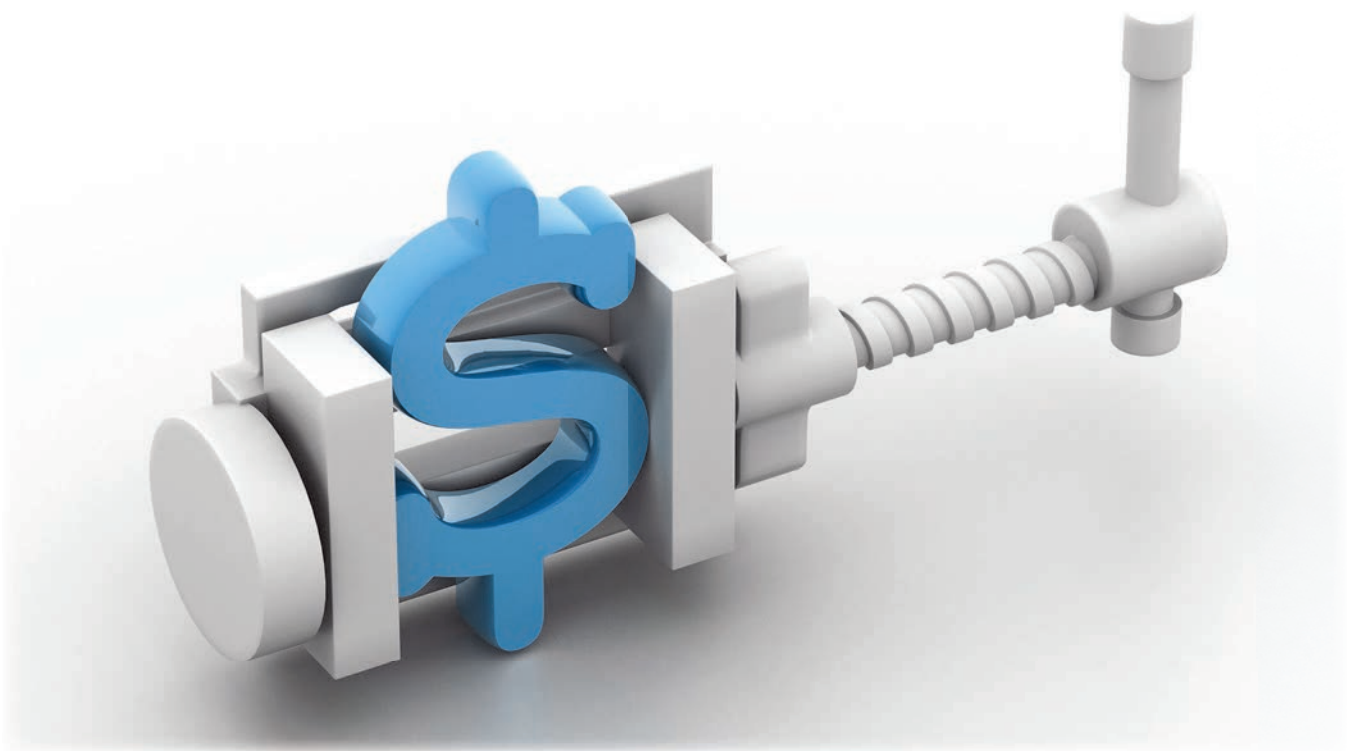


Engaging Stakeholders: Maximizing Cost Savings and Efficiencies

This district rallied the entire staff to find cost savings and efficiencies.

By Jack B. Levine



Since the economic meltdown in 2009, school districts have been forced to decrease or even eliminate budget increases across the board, despite being required to implement government mandates without the benefit of more government funding. Not only are we unable to increase our budgets, we have only a few discretionary accounts from which to make budget cuts.

Taxpayers and other stakeholders often don't understand that districts have tight budgets with no fat. They don't see the negative impact of small or no budget increases on the level of education provided to the district's students. Many believe we are stuck with the notion that it takes money to solve all of the district's problems.

To provide quality education on a decreased budget, districts far and wide have joined consortia and shared services, installed energy-efficient lighting, offered

voluntary early retirement programs, switched to self-insured plans, negotiated for lower-cost health care plans for employees, and so much more. Yet we must still find a way to cut costs.

What if we could get the entire staff actively involved in finding cost savings and efficiencies?

No Savings Too Small

Our goal at Amity Regional School District No. 5 in Woodbridge, Connecticut, has always been to provide an exceptional educational program to our students and still be mindful of the financial impact on the taxpayers. Each year, we have had to find cost savings and efficiencies to offset the higher costs for salaries, medical insurance, special education, and unfunded mandates. For the most part, the ideas have come from the district. Now, however, we encourage input from the staff.

We need sufficient funding to move the district forward, and we need to find ways to use our limited resources wisely. So we created an environment in which each employee feels empowered, encouraged, and energized to look for, recommend, and implement cost savings and efficiencies.

In September 2014, we began engaging the district's staff in finding cost savings, and in less than a year, our staff found savings of \$139,721! That is a remarkable amount for a small school district of 2,350 students and three school buildings.

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A school district can achieve more cost savings and efficiencies if the entire staff is engaged and committed. In other words, all the employees must be invested in finding ways to do things more efficiently. That is a sea change in how many school districts function, but it is vital as we attempt to balance the needs and wants of our stakeholders.

We welcome all suggestions from staff, whether the projected savings are big or small. For example, staff members suggested two strategies that—although garnering small dollar savings—demonstrate how our staff members are looking for every way possible to do more with less:

- A media center secretary volunteered to regularly check the copier room in her school building to ensure that paper, ink cartridges, and other supplies were adequate and to ensure that the copier was in working order. That step resulted in less downtime for the copier and, consequently, greater efficiency.
- A custodian designed and implemented an inexpensive wooden addition to some of our moving dollies. By spending a few dollars on lumber, we now move furniture more safely and efficiently. We saved hundreds of dollars by not purchasing new equipment.

We share the savings strategies with the board of education at meetings and with the public through local access television.

Road Map to Change

The following road map can help a district establish a positive culture that promotes staff empowerment and ownership.

- **Embrace.** The superintendent and board of education must lead the way. In Amity Regional School District No. 5, the board set a goal to “continuously

improve operations to ensure the greatest efficiency and effectiveness by fostering a district culture in which all staff are maximizing cost savings and efficiencies.”

- **Develop.** A committee of stakeholders, including staff members, parents, and students, should work together to develop ways to bring everyone on board in the pursuit of cost savings.
- **Communicate.** We use a variety of methods to explain what we want to do, why it will benefit everyone, and how employees can participate. Electronic media, newsletters, and public affairs programs are good vehicles. The entire staff is made aware of big and small contributions from their colleagues. Recognition can be a strong inducement to others to step up and be a part of a school district team.
- **Understand.** The school district staff must understand the benefits of finding cost savings and improving efficiencies. For example, found funds can be reallocated for higher-priority needs, cost savings can help reduce the requested budget level of funding (i.e., lower budget requests), and taxpayers can be reassured that their money is being used wisely.
- **Benefit.** When our stakeholders see that we are seriously looking at ways to best use our limited resources, they react positively. Town officials have expressed their admiration of our efforts, and taxpayers have given their vote of confidence through the ballot box. Our most recent budget passed on the first try in all three member towns by more than two to one. That was due in large measure to the faith that the taxpayers have in us to spend their money wisely. (Our district holds the unenviable record in Connecticut of 17 consecutive budget rejections in one year. We now have a record of 10 consecutive years of budget passage the first time.)

By changing our district's culture, we are engaging and challenging the entire staff. If other districts are willing to make this kind of effort, the results can be amazing.

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