Making Hard Choices in Tough Times Reflection

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Case Context

Budget shortfalls are inevitable in turbulent economic times. The United States has experienced twelve recessions since World War II (Roos, 2020). Because school districts rely on tax revenue, school budgets are inevitably affected by the fluctuations of the economy. In this case, the superintendent must make a difficult choice about what to cut to balance the budget for a large school district.

Issues

This case study discusses several issues. The primary issue is how to reduce spending to balance the budget while still meeting the school district's mission – "… ensure a safe, challenging and future-oriented learning environment that nurtures self-esteem and provides all students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills to become a productive, fulfilled literate, and responsible member of a democratic society." The district must make a 3% budget cut while also increasing the students they serve by 5%. Regardless of where budget cuts are made, someone will lose a valuable asset. On the proverbial chopping block are assistant principals at middle schools and large elementary schools, the technology initiative, and middle school planning time.

The technology integration project has been lauded in the community and in the country. It was originally funded with grant money, which is no longer available. On the other hand, the media has portrayed the assistant principal positions as wasteful spending. The biggest concern is how the budget cuts will affect the students who are not making adequate progress and are unable to meet state standards on grade-level assessments. This district has eight "failing" schools, which should be the primary concern when determining where to make cuts in the budget.

Solutions

Prior to identifying a solution, the team needs hard data. Each member of the team brought what they understand about the assets they care about, but they failed to address how that asset made an impact on students' ability to learn and demonstrate their growth. Therefore, they need to begin by conducting a needs assessment. From there, the team should consider whether there are additional funding sources, such as grants to reduce the burden of the technology program on the district's budget.

Another solution that hasn't been proposed is to consider how positions can be reconfigured to allocate more resources to the struggling schools. This need may be found during the needs assessment.

Anticipated Outcome

I anticipate that the outcome for this district will involve a combination of cuts and grant funding. The district can scale back their technology initiative by maintaining what they have and growing the program at a slower pace, which could potentially be paid for by additional grant funding especially given the positive press and support the initiative has received. I believe reallocating some of the additional resources such as assistant principals to include roles that directly impact student learning such as intervention and data coordinator could shine a positive light on that position and demonstrate that they are necessary to achieve the district's vision. Teacher plan/collaboration time could be cut by a quarter with teachers reassigned to run interventions but still maintain the opportunity to collaborate and plan each day.

Unintended consequences of this solution are that faculty and administrators don’t feel valued and choose to leave the district. Limiting the technology initiative could frustrate parents and community members who moved to the area to take advantage of this program. Another unintended consequence is that students educational experience is improved by reallocated resources and test scores could improve.

References

Roos, D. (2020, April 29). We've had 12 recessions Since WWII. Here's how we got out of them. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from https://www.history.com/news/us-economic-recessions-timeline

Sorenson, R. D., & Goldsmith, L. M. (2018). *The principal's guide to school budgeting* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.