

PPBS: What Should the School Dollar Buy?

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CAN your community understand its school budget? Can citizens analyze the cost of specific programs or evaluate their effectiveness? Have they thought about and committed themselves to educational goals and priorities? Does your school administration have the necessary support for the development of new programs—or even existing programs? Raising these questions means that you are part of a national scene that has begun to question where the educational dollar is going and what it is buying.

A year ago, these were the concerns of Lower Merion, Pennsylvania, a prosperous suburban community. This is how members of one community organization, the local League of Women Voters, tried to get their school district to move toward an Educational Planning-Programming-Budgeting System (EPPBS), a budgeting tool which has been defined most simply as a tool used to plan and manage the activities and resources of the school district in its efforts to develop meaningful and constantly improving educational programs.

In 1969 the League of Women Voters of Lower Merion and Narberth did a comprehensive study of the local school system and became interested in the need for a new and improved method of presenting the budget,

one that would relate expenditures to educational aims and provide a means of evaluating their effectiveness.

Initial research revealed that an EPPBS included these features and provided a framework for long-range planning of programs; clear definition of educational goals, objectives, and priorities; procedures for measuring cost effectiveness of programs; understanding by the public and the decision makers of just where the educational dollar is being spent; and some provisions for meaningful community involvement.

From Figure 1 it can be seen that EPPBS is a continuous cycle with four phases: planning, programming, budgeting, and evaluation. The cycle can be entered into at any phase; however, the planning stage, during which goals and priorities are established, is a logical beginning, and this is where the community should play a role.

There have been many articles written on the merits of this new system, but what has not been stressed is a description of how to gain community support, which is so important for the adoption and acceptance of

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an EPPBS. Since the League of Women Voters is an organization committed to the involvement of citizens at the grassroots level, it made extraordinary attempts to involve the community in a determination of goals, objectives, and priorities. This article details the procedures used to involve the community and subsequently to gain support for the adoption of an EPPBS.

Reaching the Community

We thought of many ways of tapping "community opinion" and came up with the following: discussion groups, a detailed questionnaire, letters to the editor, and a town meeting. The purpose of these approaches was to reach as large and as diverse a segment of the community as possible. The job of the League was to introduce the concept of EPPBS, suggest that the community had a role in determining educational goals and priorities, and to encourage the community to react. The techniques we used can serve as a blueprint for other communities.

Five community discussion groups were drawn, from parents' organizations active in school affairs; professionals in the social service field in our community; civic associations and business and professional groups; nonpublic school parents whose children comprise one-third of the potential school population; and members of the black community.

Group discussion can be a vital technique for ascertaining opinions and provoking thought within a community. In order to have an authentic reading of the groups' opinions, discussion leaders were drawn from non-committee League members, although committee members attended sessions as observers. To have an accurate account, meetings were recorded on tape as well as by a committee member.

Throughout the community discussion groups, many citizens reflected the point of view that this was an area sacred to the school administration and board of school directors. It was only after the discussions got rolling that the participants felt comfortable in expressing their opinions. To

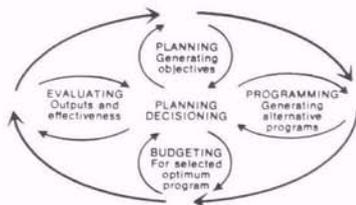


Figure 1. Phases of EPPBS

prepare the participants for the discussions, three questions were enclosed in a letter of invitation:

1. Assuming a student should acquire preparation for living, what basic knowledge and skills should schools provide? How should schools create a favorable climate for the development of constructive attitudes and capacities?
2. In view of present challenges to education due to changing values and technology, what specific targets or educational objectives can we identify and budget for?
3. What should be the budget priorities for our school district for the next five years?

At the sessions, the groups were first given a brief explanation of an EPPBS as well as a further explanation of why we had selected the study and why they were invited to participate. The preceding questions were repeated at the sessions.

The input of the community discussion groups allowed us to summarize four basic themes. The first was concern for the quality of the teacher, seen by the participants as the most vital ingredient in the educational process. Second was the idea that education depends upon acquiring a positive attitude toward learning and developing the ability to go on learning independently. The third concern was individualization, giving each child a feeling of self-worth, and making provisions within the educational system for individual differences. (Special note was made of the needs of the nonacademic child.) The fourth concept was to enlarge the community role now played by the school in helping the child integrate into the larger society. In every discussion there was a strong interest in innovation.

While the discussion group method seemed most satisfactory to use with community groups, we searched for a different method in dealing with the immediate school community (students, teachers, principals, administration, and school board members). Finally, a selected group of 129 were asked to identify goals and objectives through a Delphi Survey,¹ a highly structured series of three questionnaires based on the premise that leadership can predict what the goals and objectives of an institution would or should be for the next ten years. Attempts were made to contact these individual groups ahead of time, explain the study, and ask for cooperation. We began with the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Donald Van Wagenen, who not only gave us the support to continue our research but gave us the initial encouragement to start our study. In defining "leadership" among the students and teachers, we selected respectively senior students active in school affairs at one of the local high schools and the executive board and the representatives of the local teachers organizations.

The Delphi Technique is a rather complex procedure. For the purposes of this article, only the first questionnaire is described, in which the participants were asked to complete the following sentence for at least one and no more than five targets:

In the next decade, the School District should concentrate its energies and resources on:

- Increasing _____
- Solving _____
- Developing _____
- Preparing _____
- Other _____

Instructions for the first questionnaire read: Your responses should pertain to the School District of Lower Merion for, as one can well imagine, each community's goals and objectives may vary. Each response should be brief; preferably five or six words in length. Broad generalizations are not helpful; a concise state-

¹ The Delphi Survey was first developed by the Rand Corporation. Our questionnaires are based on a similar survey done by Frederick R. Cyphert at the University of Virginia.

ment of a target of high importance is needed. A target is defined as *what* should be done, not *how* it should be done.

Based on the answers of the 59% who responded, an advisory committee composed of a teacher, a student, the Deputy Superintendent of Schools, and two League members combined 314 statements into 40 targets of major concern. These 40 goals statements made up the second and third questionnaires, which led to the following list of top priorities.

1. Increasing the specialized programs for children at various learning levels, i.e., physically disabled, gifted, emotionally disabled
2. Fostering an atmosphere for students that encourages and rewards creative thinking in relationship to problem solving
3. Creating a climate which prizes the worth of the individual
4. Developing a curriculum that focuses on the present; that is real; that is relevant
5. Expanding the opportunities for student use of community resources, i.e., field experiences, work-study, and additional contact with people with special interests and abilities
6. Providing teachers with more support and funds for experimenting with innovative ideas and materials.

The results of this survey were interesting because of the high percentage of responses; because they revealed a high degree of correlation with the participating groups; and because they reflected many of the ideas that had emerged from the community discussion groups.

To broaden our base of community response, we tried to appeal to the public through two letters to the editor inviting response to our study. This approach yielded no response, but other communities might have a more satisfactory response from this technique. We also utilized members of the local League as a sounding board for our findings. Representing an organization of 329 members, they paralleled and supported the findings of our other investigations.

The concluding step in determining the community's educational goals and priorities was a town meeting that had in attendance over 300 members of the community. A

panel was selected to represent various points of view as well as to respond to audience questioning. The panel consisted of the President of the Board of School Directors, the Superintendent of Schools, the Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, the President of the local teachers organization, the President of the central coordinating parents' organization, and two students. After a brief summary of our preliminary findings, the panelists were asked to respond to three questions which had been sent to them in advance:

1. In your experience with the Lower Merion school system, what is being done currently to meet these goals?
2. How can these goals be met more fully? Can you translate these suggestions into specific programs and activities?
3. In your estimation, what are the major priorities for the Lower Merion school district in the next five to ten years?

The effect of having a town meeting as the final input of the study was that it allowed all the points of view that had been gathered to be shared, reappraised, and responded to by the board and the administration. It provided a direct means of getting the ideas of the community into the hands of the decision makers and illustrated the possible use of this method for ongoing community thinking.

Where Do We Go from Here?

All the findings and recommendations were published in a booklet *School Budgeting and the Community: Steps Toward an Educational Planning-Programming-Budgeting System* and presented to each member of the school board along with the following suggestions:

1. The presentation of a school budget

that is meaningful to the public, that can answer specific questions about the use of school funds

2. Earlier and more numerous budget hearings
3. Establishment of a procedure for the expression of community goals and priorities
4. Formation of a broad-based ad hoc citizens committee on the budget
5. Development of a course by the administration to be offered at our adult education classes, devoted to current thinking in education
6. Development by the school board of a speakers bureau to meet the growing interest of the community in school matters
7. Greater liaison with existing community groups interested in education.

Where do we go from here? We believe our school district needs an EPPBS. We believe that our methods and techniques have laid the foundation for community involvement and at the same time have prepared the public for a needed change in the planning and management of the funds of our school district. We plan to keep reminding the school board of the desirability of this new tool in budget making.

In fact, as this article is being written the school board has set up, for the first time, a schedule of early public budget hearings which will continue until final adoption of the new budget in June. At the same time, administrators are involving and training each school principal along the lines of individual responsibility centers. Most important, for the development of an EPPBS, they have hired an outside consultant firm to study the district data processing needs, which will include the possibility of establishment of an EPPBS. They have made a careful and studied beginning. Other administration and/or community groups can follow a similar course. □

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