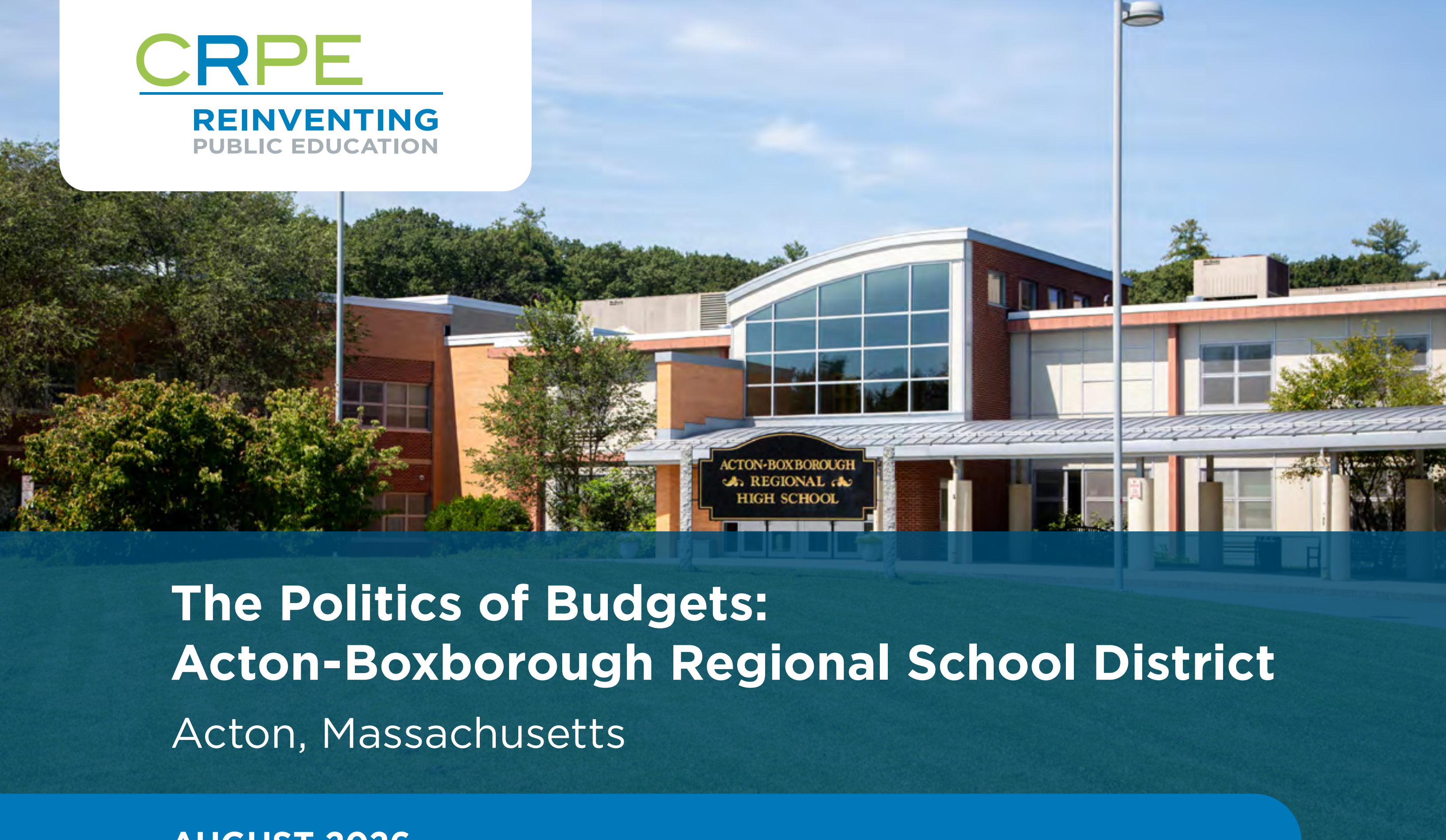

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The Politics of Budgets: Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

Acton, Massachusetts

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Acton-Boxborough Regional School District was under financial strain due to increasing costs and declining enrollment. But due to the relative affluence of the community, residents did not believe that the district was grappling with significant budgeting pressures. They assumed that just "trimming the fat" would be enough to close the gap. To make the case for change, Acton-Boxborough had to explain the nature of the crisis to the public. They did this by assembling a budget planning committee of teachers, principals, and randomly selected community members and requiring that committee to balance the budget themselves. Eventually, the district approved staff reductions and one school closure. This case study is a companion to a larger report, *The Politics of Budgets: How Fourteen Districts Reduced Spending While Protecting Student Learning Experiences*.

I. Background and District Overview

Like many districts, Acton-Boxborough Regional School District had been under sustained financial stress driven by rising health insurance costs, increasing special education expenditures, and declining enrollment. Despite these pressures, many residents believed that the district's budgetary concerns were exaggerated and that any strain had to have been minor due to the relative affluence of the community. Budget discussions often centered on addressing low-hanging fruit, such as transportation, rather than on making hard decisions about structural costs. Earlier efforts to reduce spending, which were based on the district leadership's priorities, analyses, and strategies, had triggered disproportionate pushback, even when the reductions were modest. Over time, the public came to view certain line items as untouchable, and they did not see alternate cuts as necessary.

Students in Acton-Boxborough are predominantly White (49%), Asian (31.9%), Latine (9.5%), or Multi-Race (6.2%), with smaller proportions of Black (3.3%) and Indigenous (0.1%) students.

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT BY THE NUMBERS

- Number of schools: 9
- 2024-25 student enrollment: 5,005
- Number of teachers and staff: 726
- Annual operating budget: About $117 million

II. The Nature of the Shortfall or Financial Pressure

In prior budget cycles, even modest reductions had triggered outsized community reaction. Certain positions and programs—such as teaching assistants and math and reading specialists—had come to symbolize the district's identity and values. The district wanted to preserve the high levels of instructional support and small group sizes that these positions and programs supported. Proposals to adjust them, even when enrollment had declined, were often interpreted as a retreat from excellence rather than as a response to changing conditions. Over time, this dynamic created a pattern: leadership would propose targeted reductions, resistance would mount, and the most politically sensitive items would remain untouched.

Over five years, enrollment declined by almost 3%. As enrollment fell, fixed costs did not decrease proportionally, and in many areas, staffing patterns did not change, despite having smaller student cohorts. Health insurance costs continued to rise, and special education expenditures increased as student needs intensified.

While the district could have sought substantial tax increases to offset these pressures, a strong contingent of voters was reluctant to support significant tax increases. The last override passed by a margin of only 37 votes (3,191 "yes" votes to 3,154 "no" votes). Some long-time residents, including those without children in the schools, were grappling with the financial strain of rising property taxes.

But the district's structural pressures did not recede. Smaller, incremental reductions had not closed recurring budget gaps, and district leadership recognized that their core challenges were not just financial; they also needed to cultivate community support for budget cuts through informative communication. Without a shared understanding of fiscal realities, the district's attempts at meaningful change would continue to generate strong resistance within the community.

III. Strategy Development and Implementation

With this in mind, the district focused on reshaping how the community understood the budget before sharing proposed cuts. Their strategy centered on deliberate, structured communication and an unconventional budget planning process designed to build shared knowledge, surface assumptions, and require participants to confront tradeoffs directly.

The community's opposition to budget proposals was primarily rooted in mistrust and incomplete information. Many residents believed meaningful savings could be achieved through better management or trimming perceived inefficiencies. Until those assumptions were surfaced, examined transparently, and effectively debunked, broader structural adjustments would continue to face resistance.

The district reframed the conversation by transforming how budget decisions were understood and made. Rather than presenting a superintendent-developed reduction plan for feedback, district leaders structured a process in which a representative committee was responsible for closing the budget gap.

To create this committee, the district determined which stakeholders needed to be involved and invited participants to create a balanced and representative group. The committee included teachers, principals, parents, two school board members, the teachers' union president, an objective third-party facilitator and researcher, and randomly selected community members.

This committee's composition was thoughtful and unique in a few ways:

- It brought teachers and their union into budgeting from the start.
- It gave a meaningful voice to principals.
- It involved community members both with and without children in the school.
- It included a neutral third party with extensive experience in school budgeting, who had the capacity to conduct research that would be perceived as unbiased.

About half of the staff, families, and community members were selected at random, which proved to be pivotal. Two long-time residents without children in the schools highlighted that rising property taxes were affecting their ability to remain in the community. Their perspectives shifted the tone of the discussions and broadened understanding of the community's financial pressures, especially for teachers and the union leadership.

To ensure that the budget committee knew enough to make informed decisions, the superintendent shared a jargon-free explanation of the town's current budget situation, the causes of the district's structural deficit, the drivers of increased costs, and how school spending in Acton-Boxborough compared to spending in similar communities. The district also hired a consultant, New Solutions K12, to share best practices in budgeting and practical strategies for closing budget gaps. The committee met with district leadership and New Solutions K12 every 2-3 weeks over the course of two and a half months.

Staff Reductions

The committee also reviewed interventionist staff that provided direct services to students, which the community valued highly. District leaders knew that any attempt to reduce the number of staff in these roles was likely to face pushback. To build an objective fact base for the committee's decision-making, the external consultants analyzed the schedules and current use of staff time in these roles. The results showed that while the staff in these roles were valuable, they were also underutilized in some cases. For example, the use-of-time analysis looked at the amount of time reading and math specialists were spending with students during the work week as well as their average student group size. Self-reported staff data showed that, on average:

- Math specialists were spending about **47%** of their day with students
- Reading specialists were spending about **55%** of their day with students

The analysis determined that if these staff were to spend 65% of their day with students, it could add additional capacity (without adding more staff) equivalent to:

- **1.1 full-time** math specialists or almost **$100,000**
- **0.6 full-time** reading teachers or almost **$55,000**

For group sizes, the data showed that, on average:

- Roughly **50%** of both math and reading specialists' groups were made up of **1-2 students**.
- **Only 1%** of math specialists' and 6% of reading specialists' groups were made up of **5 or more students**.
- The average student group size for math specialists was **2.5 students**.
- The average student group size for reading specialists was **2.9 students**.

If the district were to increase average group sizes for math and reading specialists to five students (from 2.5 students and 2.9 students, respectively), this would be the equivalent of adding approximately **3.0 full-time** math specialists and **2.5 full-time** reading specialists. The district could serve either more students at no extra cost or the existing number of students with fewer members of staff.

At the end of the process, the district ultimately chose to reduce the number of full-time interventionists while increasing the number of students working with them.

Transportation

In the case of Acton-Boxborough, transportation costs were widely considered low-hanging fruit for potential cuts.

Acton-Boxborough operates open-choice elementary schools. Families do not have to enroll in their neighborhood school, and the district provides transportation. As a result, multiple buses may pass by the same home each morning. This visibility created a perception of large-scale waste and inefficiency in the community.

The committee followed up and found that in the 2024 fiscal year, the district spent approximately $2.0 million on students' transportation to and from elementary school, which appeared to be overspending. Further analysis, however, painted a different picture. Massachusetts reimburses approximately 85% of eligible transportation costs for regional school districts. Therefore, the district's net cost on the $2 million was approximately $300,000, or roughly 0.3% of the total budget.

Table 1. Estimated Annual District Costs of Busing Elementary Students FY24-25

Total Estimated Elementary Busing Cost	Approximate State Reimbursement Rate	Estimated State Reimbursement	Estimated Actual Elementary Busing Cost to District	Percent of Total District Budget
$2,000,000	85%	$1,700,000	$300,000	0.3%

Additionally, an independent routing assessment concluded that the system's utilization was aligned with district targets and was operating efficiently. Fall 2024 ridership analysis showed that 75% of buses were scheduled above nominal capacity by an average of 25%, which is consistent with best practice since not all students ride daily.

Once this data was shared and reviewed by the committee, the narrative shifted. Members understood that transportation was not actually a major cost driver, and members began to confront the reality that meaningful savings would require tradeoffs and tough decisions. The fact that this analysis was conducted and shared by an independent third-party expert helped the committee let go of this long-held assumption about the district's transportation model.

Requiring the Committee to Close the Gap

The committee was tasked explicitly with balancing the budget. Members were given a menu of options and an interactive tool to model tradeoffs.

Table 2. Acton-Boxborough Regional School District - Elementary Cost Opportunity Menu

	Strategy	Potential Estimated Savings	Other Benefits
1	Reading specialists spend 75% of their time working directly with the current number of students served and reduce the number of reading specialists.	$170,000	
2	Math specialists spend 75% of their time working directly with the current number of students served and reduce the number of math specialists.	$210,000	

	Strategy	Potential Estimated Savings	Other Benefits
3	Counselors spend 75% of their time working directly with the current number of students currently served and reduce the number of counselors.	$210,000	
4	Staff specials teachers* more precisely to enrollment by using partial FTE and reduce the number of specials teachers.	$520,000	
5	Share specials teacher staffing at Merriam and McCarthy-Towne and reduce the number of specials teachers (cannot be combined with option 4).	$190,000	
6	Share specials teacher staffing at Gates and CT-Douglas and reduce the number of specials teachers (cannot be combined with option 4).	$240,000	
7	Increase average group size for math specialists to five students and reduce the number of math specialists.	$200,000	
8	Repurpose general education classroom assistant funding by 25% (through attrition).	$165,000	
9	Repurpose general education classroom assistant funding by 50% (through attrition).	$330,000	
10	Repurpose general education classroom assistant funding by 75%.	$500,000	
11	Repurpose general education classroom assistant funding by 100%.	$665,000	
12	Reading specialists spend 75% of their time working directly with students and do not reduce number of reading specialists.	$0	Able to serve more students across schools with same staff.
13	Math specialists spend 75% of their time working directly with students and do not reduce the number of math specialists.	$0	Able to serve more students across schools with same staff.
14	Counselors spend 75% of their time working directly with students and do not reduce the number of counselors.	$0	Able to serve more students across schools with same staff.
15	Increase average group size for math specialists to five students and maintain the number of math specialists.	$0	Able to serve more students across schools with same staff.

*Such as art, music, physical education, library and computer sciences, or foreign language teachers

	Strategy	Potential Estimated Savings	Other Benefits
16	Assign reading specialists based on student need rather than one per school.	$0	Able to serve more students struggling in reading at schools with higher need.
17	Assign math specialists based on student need rather than one per school.	$0	Able to serve more students struggling in math at schools with higher need.
18	Assign counselors based on student need rather than one per school.	$0	Able to serve more students with social-emotional or mental health needs at schools with higher need.
19	Assign STEAM and literacy coaches based on teacher count and need rather than one per school.	$0	More fairly distributes teacher support.
20	Lean into open choice and create more discernible differences between schools while maintaining consistency in curriculum, assessment, and instruction.	$0	
21	End open choice at elementary schools.	$0**	**May cost the district $470,000 - $700,000 due to increase in number of classrooms.

Unlike in previous attempts (where administrators produced a list of cuts that was then criticized by the public), this format meant the committee had to make the tough choices themselves.

They were given a list of potential reductions which included viable options put forward by committee members, recommendations from school and district leaders, and suggestions from the outside consultants. In each case, the consultant calculated the associated savings, which allowed members to debate the priority of each option rather than whether a particular cut would save a lot or a little.

This structure shifted the dynamic from whether reductions should occur to which reductions were most aligned with district priorities. It also increased the committee members' empathy for those tasked with building a budget in difficult times. They realized that while none of the tradeoffs were perfect, doing nothing was not an option, either.

Offering graduated reduction options rather than all-or-nothing choices

The process also opened up the discussion of how much to trim. Many reductions were presented in tiers rather than as binary choices. Staffing reductions of kindergarten paraprofessional support were modeled at 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100%. Reductions of coaches and interventionists were also modeled at multiple levels. While there may have been little support for eliminating an entire line item or program, reducing it proved much easier. For example, the district had considered eliminating kindergarten paraprofessionals entirely, but knew the pushback would be intense. The committee members did not want to fully eliminate these paraprofessionals, but many of them were comfortable with a partial cut.

IV. Outcomes and Impact

The district achieved approximately $1.5 million in initial reductions: $500,000 from line items that had previously been considered politically untouchable, along with roughly $1 million in additional reductions the following year that generated minimal pushback. These included a partial reduction of kindergarten paraprofessionals, a reduction in secondary staffing based on course enrollments, and a reduction in interventionists paired with scheduling changes that increased the number of students served.

The following year, the school committee voted to close one standalone elementary school and reorganize grade bands into K-3 and 4-6 configurations at two other schools, increasing sections per grade level and improving staffing efficiencies across all grade levels. This reorganization generated approximately $1.8 million in additional savings. Class sizes increased modestly by one to two students on average. Some savings were also reinvested in additional counseling support.

District leaders reflected that these proposals would likely have been untenable in prior years. The groundwork laid through the budget planning process reframed the discussion around long-term sustainability and responsible stewardship, while still providing high-quality services for students. Many of the committee members were purposefully selected because they were influential and could act as informal messengers to explain why these decisions were needed and that they represented the best solution to a tough situation. This process reset community understanding of the district's financial realities and created an enduring level of trust that allowed bold and important changes to pass with limited pushback.

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Front cover photo: Exterior shot of Axton-Boxborough Regional High School. Courtesy of Axton-Boxborough Regional School District.

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