The Politics of Budgets: How Fourteen Districts Reduced Spending While Protecting Student Learning Experiences

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Introduction

Unstable revenues and rising costs are causing chaos for superintendents and school board members. Until the 2010s, district financial struggles were largely confined to special cases, such as big-city systems in Chicago and Cleveland or rural districts losing population, which states could bail out. Today, fiscal crises are no longer the exception. In a recent RAND survey, more than half of school district leaders reported that "addressing budget shortfalls" is one of their top three priorities for the 2025-26 school year.

On the revenue side, lower enrollments caused by declining birth rates, fewer immigrant children in school, and post-pandemic transfers of students to private, charter, and home schools are pulling money out of district budgets. At the same time, the cost of educating each student continues to rise: teachers' salaries grow roughly 3%a year from standard step increases alone, and a greater share of students now qualify for costly special services, including special education and English language acquisition. Even when schools have fewer students, they end up spending 20-30% more in per-pupil dollars.[1] Volatile state and federal funding, as well as inflation and higher staffing rates post-pandemic, are also complicating fiscal forecasts for district leaders. This perfect storm of higher costs and tighter budgets shows no sign of abating, and since many district leaders have already cut their "low-hanging fruit" line items, they are running out of possible solutions.

But for some troubled districts, there could be a way through the crisis. **This report gives district and state leaders, including superintendents, school board members, CFOs, business managers, as well as student advocacy groups and other supporters, a look at how 14 districts were able to cut costs while preserving student learning experiences** (see sidebar on pages 3-4 for details about the districts). These district leaders' approaches to budgeting followed a familiar arc—they forecasted revenues and costs, analyzed programs, and then cut the most expensive or least effective line items. However, they were especially distinctive in how they managed the always-difficult politics of budgets. While aspects of their local political contexts varied, they all took steps to cut costs and resolve long-run deficits while working openly and fairly with affected parents and educators.

As one superintendent explained, "Funding runs alongside politics." Refusing to acknowledge that reality results in turmoil. Inevitably, budget cuts affect what teachers, principals, students, and communities value, and when people feel that something they value is at risk, they make their voices heard. Leaders who treat the politics as a downstream communications problem, or something to manage after the financial decisions are made, often find themselves announcing program cuts, staffing reductions, or school closings and then reversing as support collapses around them because they didn't build their case in advance.

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1. Nationally, inflation-adjusted per pupil expenditures have increased from $14,894 in the 2014-15 school year to a projection of $16,242 in the 2025-26 school year.

Instead, the leaders in our sample started by framing the budget challenge publicly and using data to clarify both the size of the problem and the criteria for evaluating cuts. They then made strategic cost-cutting decisions in dialogue with the constituents most affected, compromising on the scope or timing of cuts if the underlying savings could be preserved. Throughout, they communicated early, often, and honestly, including about what was not on the table. They also understood that doing this work was not a "one-and-done" situation: budget cutting and political resistance are multi-year processes that require continuous attention. The report closes with implications for district leaders, their supporters, and state policymakers. Chief among those implications is the fact that maintaining financial sustainability is now an ongoing responsibility that requires political acumen to manage.

ABOUT THE CASES

With support from Afton Partners, Education Resource Strategies, and New Solutions K12, CRPE commissioned 14 case studies about school districts and charter school networks that were able to reduce spending while preserving student learning experiences.[2] We've included summaries of relevant cases throughout this report, and four additional in-depth case studies accompany this brief (Rapides Parish Schools, Acton-Boxborough Regional School District, Lubbock Independent School District, and Uplift Education). We worked with our partners to choose cases that would provide real-time, practical guidance to system leaders.

We reviewed budget scenarios from 20 districts and selected 14 based on their success in cutting costs while preserving student experiences.[3] We prioritized a final sample that reflected diverse challenges and a range of strategic approaches to closing budget shortfalls. In both this report and our selection of published case studies, we prioritized cases with common financial challenges and whose strategies may be replicable and relevant for others. The reasons for these districts' budget crises included:

- Declining enrollment and inaccurate enrollment projections, including fluctuations in student enrollment and misalignment between projected and actual enrollment, resulting in high staffing levels and underutilized facilities.
- Changing student needs, such as an increase in students requiring specialized supports (e.g., special education services, multilingual learner programming) that require increases in staffing and resources.
- Loss of federal grants, including the expiration of federal pandemic relief funding and defunding of federally funded programs. *(Continues on next page)*

2. We selected these districts because they were successful in cutting costs while preserving student experiences; they do not provide a representative sample of districts facing fiscal distress.

3. We did not assess case study districts on whether they maintained learning outcomes (e.g. achievement, graduation, attendance, teacher retention) but instead looked for whether or not districts were able to maintain or improve students' classroom and learning experiences.

- Inefficient staffing procedures, including higher staff-to-student ratios for some student groups (in particular, special education), misalignment between current student enrollment and staffing, and class rosters that require additional staffing.
- Changes in local and/or state funding formulas, including shifts in local revenue sources (e.g., property taxes) and updates to state funding formulas.

The case studies reflect a diverse set of districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) across geographies, community types, and system sizes. The sample includes twelve traditional public school districts and two CMOs across the states of Arizona, California, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas. While the sample includes urban, suburban, rural, and town communities, the majority of the systems are concentrated in urban areas. Enrollment sizes vary widely, from small districts serving fewer than 2,000 students to large systems serving more than 80,000, with several mid-sized districts and CMOs in between.

CRPE researchers then analyzed these commissioned cases, tracking contextual factors, financial strategies, and common themes on how districts approached the budget-cutting process. The findings in this brief reflect our analysis.

Top takeaway: Make sure your political strategy is as smart as your financial strategy.

Above all, leaders in our case study districts acknowledged the importance of politics when cutting their budgets. In fact, two of the districts in our study learned this lesson the hard way. They had previously paid too little attention to politics when making cuts. Consequently, they encountered such strong community pushback that they had to shelve their proposals and try again the next year. Based on these challenging experiences, these leaders learned to treat budget cuts as a process of political leadership and negotiation. They did not first decide on which cuts would be made and then "sell" those cuts to their communities. Instead, they wove budget moves into their political moves.

Effective leaders started by committing to preserving student learning experiences. They were upfront with staff, families, and community members about the size of the deficit, what was driving it, and the unavoidability of cuts. They used data to analyze various programs' return on investment (ROI) to determine whether programs were worth the cost and then weighed cuts that would lead to one-time savings against cuts that would reduce costs over time. Throughout, they kept constituent interests front-of-mind, treated opposition as an opportunity to compromise or as a signal that change might be needed, and communicated early and often rather than presenting decisions after the fact. Most of these leaders also anticipated that their proposed cuts would be multi-year endeavors. We provide more information on how their financial strategies included these political strategies in the sections that follow.

Rapides Parish Schools: Compromise with key constituents

Leaders in Rapides Parish Schools in Alexandria, LA, had tried and failed to close schools, but through a strategy of building political acceptance in their community, the district was able to close six schools in 2023-24. Rapides leadership explained how some of the funds saved by closing schools could be used for things parents and educators wanted, including:

- Funding salary increases for all teachers and staff, creating a direct benefit for educators and a clear reason for teachers to support the closures.
- Launching a fully funded Head Start preschool program in two of the vacated school buildings, providing expanded early childhood access while signaling continued investment in the community.
- Developing a magnet program in another repurposed building, offering families new academic options.
- Introducing a behavioral intervention program in another of the vacated buildings to further support students' needs.

District leaders were transparent about how saved money would also be used to reduce debts, and they gave up on a district-initiated community schools program that had not been well-received by parents.

Start with what you will preserve.

Leaders began their budgeting processes by first figuring out what they would protect. In most of the 14 districts we studied, leaders wanted to preserve effective student learning experiences. However, some districts sought to preserve higher-quality facilities or higher staff retention and job satisfaction. Advancing equity was another common priority across our cases, which at times meant preserving programs supporting marginalized students or expanding access to career pathways and academic supports.

These priorities signaled that some cuts were off the table. When districts have stated commitments, they eliminate wishful thinking on the part of staff or families. Leaders in Pickerington Local School District, for example, faced pressure to increase staffing from employees and the teachers' union, but they had established early on in their budgeting process that there would be no new spending. They then used that commitment to guide their decision to redesign special education programming using existing levels of staffing.

Naming priorities also did practical work: it established the criteria by which proposed cuts would be evaluated. For most leaders, prioritizing effective student learning experiences meant assessing programs against measures of efficiency or efficacy. Others framed their criteria in terms of outcomes they were unwilling to sacrifice: striving toward more equitable student learning, building instructional or curriculum quality, or stabilizing labor relations.

Be upfront about the size, root causes, and urgency of the budget crisis, as well as the inevitability of cuts.

When leaders were able to get staff and community members to understand the magnitude of the budgetary challenges they faced, they built the foundation for the harder conversations ahead. They also made it less likely that others would later see proposed cuts as arbitrary or avoidable.

To establish a basis for shared understanding, leaders depended on the traditional budgeting process of forecasting funding and costs (and often contracted with accounting consultants to conduct analyses) and then developed resources for teachers, other staff, and families. These forecast resources drew on data, such as enrollment trends, staff salaries, operational expenditures, and projected revenues based on state and federal funding formulas and local taxing ability. For example, leaders in Monroe County Community School Corporation used relevant data to forecast an ongoing structural deficit. They then shared that forecast directly with their community as the starting point for the work that followed.

Monroe County Community School Corporation: Deliberate, data-driven approach grounded in transparency

Leadership of the Monroe County Community School Corporation (MCCSC) in Indiana engaged deeply with community stakeholders. The superintendent conducted more than 200 listening sessions with staff, families, and community members to build a shared understanding of the district's financial trajectory and to clarify priorities. Board engagement intensified, and multi-year projections and cash-flow modeling ensured that their governance decisions reflected long-term realities rather than single-year snapshots. Public-facing quarterly reports, a dedicated financial website, and explanatory communications were used to improve clarity around Indiana's complex funding system. One important message from MCCSC leadership was that the deficits could not be made up without some school closures and staffing reductions. Though the district tried to minimize the number of classroom teachers cut, some layoffs were unavoidable, and these were carefully justified.

MCCSC leaders ensured that no one was surprised when strong actions were proposed, and that the broader community, not just the most engaged groups, had the facts.

Ask not just, "Does it work?" but, "Is it worth it?"

Though district leaders always want to know whether specific programs effectively support student learning, in times of budgetary distress, another question emerges: *Is a given intervention or program worth what it costs?* To answer that question, leaders used data, including various student outcomes, staffing and facility or supply costs, and local labor market information, to analyze which programs or services were cost-effective, efficient, and worth preserving. They were then able to identify and eliminate low-performing programs while continuing to fund those that showed greater returns on investment.

In practice, leaders conducted ROI analyses by comparing the outcomes of current programs or services using relevant data, such as student test scores, enrollment, or other data based on desired measures. Leaders then layered on financial data, such as staffing costs and per-pupil spending, to identify which programs or services resulted in a high ROI, which could be improved, and which might need to be redesigned or eliminated. Importantly, several of the districts relied on external consultants to support these tailored analyses.[4]

When faced with rising staffing costs that outpaced the funding gains from rising student enrollment, Dublin City Schools' leaders analyzed classroom enrollment data to identify where actual class sizes fell below district targets. They were able to identify where they had more staffing than needed, and ultimately, this led to improved efficiency through changes to class sizes, teacher assignments, and scheduling.

Lubbock Independent School District's leaders assessed the return on investment for each of their Career and Technical Education pathways by considering both the district's financial investment and the outcomes each provided to graduates (e.g., potential wages and job growth). For the latter, they used local labor market statistics and data from graduates to examine whether pathways led to jobs with above-median local labor market growth, wages, and market share, whether compensation for the jobs fell above the living wage threshold, and whether graduates persisted in the pathway at above-median rates.

Mix one-time cuts with cuts that permanently remove recurring costs.

Most district leaders facing a budget shortfall start with one-time cuts, or the"low-hanging fruit." But the highest recurring costs, like staffing and school building maintenance, are structural and therefore the hardest to cut. All the districts we studied were reluctant to lay off teachers or close schools, so they mixed one-time cuts with cuts to structural costs to reduce the severity of future years' deficits.

One-time cuts might include discontinuing ineffective contracts or programs while retaining high-impact ones by using data to identify and eliminate low performers. Similarly, some districts turned to one-time funds, like grants or tapping into reserve funding, to fill gaps for a year or two.

On the other hand, structural cuts might include:

- Closing or consolidating schools or redrawing attendance boundaries to better align resources with enrollment and community priorities.

4 For more detail on how districts conducted ROI analyses please see the Lubbock Independent School District and Acton-Boxborough Regional School District case studies.

- Adopting new procedures to increase efficiency, such as reducing the number of new hires, increasing class sizes to consolidate students and staff, and implementing performance-based pay.
- Laying off classroom and non-classroom staff, implementing reductions in force tied to enrollment trends and program demands, and eliminating non-instructional and support positions.

The savviest district leaders avoided promising never to cut something, even when they did not need to cut it that particular year. North Chicago Community Unit School District, for example, has been able to balance budgets without school closings but has not ruled out doing so if the enrollment or funding situations get worse.

North Chicago Community Unit School District: Community needs kept front and center when leaders considered a range of cuts

Leaders in North Chicago set aside infeasible actions, including school closings, which leaders thought would be too harmful to the community and could be avoided by making other, less intrusive cuts. They considered:

- Reducing central office costs through attrition, for example, by redistributing duties from three retiring district-office staff rather than replacing them.
- Tightening discretionary contracts, particularly for consultants and external providers whose impact on student outcomes was unclear.
- Evaluating specialized school programs and “nice-to-have” initiatives created with philanthropic or ESSER funds to distinguish which were essential and which could be scaled back.
- Asking schools and departments to propose 5% cuts, with the understanding that some programs might be cut completely so that others could be preserved.

North Chicago staff members tasked with developing these options understood that inaction on their parts could bring school closures back into the picture. Even when principals disliked having to develop reductions for their schools, they nonetheless trusted district leaders to act transparently and in accordance with equity-based criteria.

Keep constituent interests front-of-mind when deciding among cost-cutting strategies.

To understand constituent interests, the leaders in our cases invested significant amounts of time in learning what mattered most to students and families, teachers and principals, school board members, and, in some cases, the broader community. Leaders used a range of approaches to gather this input. Some drew on their own institutional knowledge built up over years in the district. Others organized public meetings or conducted listening tours, creating structured opportunities to hear directly from staff and community members. Kent County Public Schools' leaders hosted conversations to gather feedback and better understand what the community valued most, which programs and services they wanted to keep, and which considerations leaders should make when allocating funds and considering spending cuts. In larger communities, especially, leaders found it valuable to look beyond the "usual suspects." They engaged interest groups outside the traditional stakeholder circle, like civic organizations, business groups, and faith communities, which helped build broader coalitions and develop new sources of support.

Be ready to compromise, not abandon the effort.

While constituent opposition to specific cuts was inevitable, the leaders saw the pushback as a signal about what needed to change; they did not see the opposition as a signal to abandon the cuts entirely. Their ability to compromise (and not staunchly defend specific decisions) was often what allowed leaders to build trust and keep the process moving. They remained open to adjusting their proposals in ways that preserved intended savings while making cuts that were more acceptable to affected groups. Sometimes that meant modifying the scope or timing of a cut; in other cases, it meant offering staff buyouts or other transitional arrangements to reduce friction and soften opposition. For example, leaders in North Chicago ultimately redirected funds to staff salaries, which in turn helped garner teachers' political support. Similarly, in Aldine Independent School District in Texas, district leaders learned that teachers were concerned about which schools they would be assigned to, so leaders created a "concierge services" program that made sure all teachers moved to schools that were a fit.

Leaders expected that groups most affected by cuts (e.g., families and teachers in schools slated for closing) would oppose them strongly. Some localities, including Rapides, tried to mollify organized opponents by offering desirable (and affordable) new options. But some needed to overcome opposition by building city-wide coalitions that included parents and civic leaders who understood the need for cuts and believed they were being pursued responsibly.

Leaders also needed to demonstrate good faith on the revenue side. District leaders can't simply dismiss arguments that cuts aren't necessary; they have to take them seriously by making genuine, visible efforts to secure additional revenue. Leaders in Metro Nashville Public Schools relied on the district's longstanding, collaborative relationship with the city's mayor and council members to generate $77 million in additional local funding to cover popular and effective programs previously financed by federal Covid-19 recovery funds.

Communicate with transparency throughout.

The leaders in our cases did not wait for rumors and misinformation to roil key constituencies. Instead, they stayed ahead of the chatter by communicating early and often. They kept staff, families, and the public informed as the process unfolded, rather than presenting decisions after the fact. They acted with transparency, laying out the cost and income data and analysis along the way, explaining which steps had been taken, and showing real numbers on why some strategies were better than others. Sharing this information with the public helped constituencies understand not just what was being cut, but why.

Maricopa Unified School District: Upfront communication while improving efficiencies

Leaders in Maricopa Unified School District in Arizona addressed a staffing challenge that stemmed from a mismatch between projected and actual enrollment. In prior years, the district forecasted enrollment in the fall and finalized employee contracts by the following spring. When actual enrollment numbers were lower than expected, staffing levels remained higher than needed.

To correct this misalignment, leaders began using actual enrollment data after the first week of school to reduce class sections and adjust staffing. District leaders communicated these changes directly with those most affected: principals and teachers were informed before the changes appeared on the public school board agenda, teachers who needed to change grade levels or assignments were contacted personally and given time and support, and families whose students were directly affected received letters explaining the adjustment.

The district reported minimal community and staff pushback, which leaders attributed in part to the fact that they maintained clear, timely communication about enrollment and staffing needs.

Leaders also avoided mentioning options that relied on unlikely events, like sudden influxes of new state or federal funding, and instead focused on what they could control. Counting unrealistic options as genuine possibilities would have only made it harder for educators, community members, and board members to accept that real, difficult choices were unavoidable.

Honest and transparent communication built trust that leaders repeatedly cited as critical to their success. For example, in Acton-Boxborough Regional School District in Acton, MA, leaders knew that the community wanted to preserve positions such as instructional coaches, math and reading specialists, and teaching assistants, but expected cuts in central services, such as transportation, that were not actually feasible or cost-saving. To build trust, district leaders shared data on the budget gap and realistic areas for savings. This helped the committee see that staffing reductions were necessary to save money. In Sauk Prairie, a small district in Wisconsin, leaders plainly acknowledged that a cut in federal funding made it impossible to sustain a student mental health initiative but worked to find other, less expensive ways to continue to support students.

Expect a multi-year process.

Finally, leaders in the case study districts understood that managing a budget crisis was not a short-term exercise but an ongoing, long-term financial and political endeavor. Financially, cuts that balance the budget in one year might prove inadequate in the next, especially if inflation further drains purchasing power. Similarly, budget cuts can have unintended consequences, including hidden costs, and might have to be adjusted or amended. Even districts that carefully calculated the effects of a given cut on student enrollment or teacher retention sometimes found that the results were worse than expected and needed to adjust their policies as a result. For example, Uplift Education, a charter management organization in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, found that their efforts to address budget shortfalls—including large-scale reductions in force, operational changes that reduced recurring costs, fundraising to sustain priority programs, and the pursuit of a performance-based pay structure—helped balance their budget for two years but did not eliminate the organization's structural deficit. This left them vulnerable to future cost increases or enrollment shocks.

Politically, smaller annual cuts may be more feasible because what communities can tolerate in one year is often insufficient. In Aldine, leaders are in their third year of "right-sizing" the district by assessing enrollment, student needs, building capacity, and funding sources each year. After deciding to close six schools during the 2024-25 school year, the team is considering recommendations for changes in five to six more schools and guarding their flexibility to make further adjustments

Implications

Cutting schools, programs, and staffing inevitably causes backlash. Leaders' jobs can depend on whether they manage the budget process successfully, and in some cases, the best efforts might not be enough. But the experiences of the districts in our cases point to several practical implications for district leaders, their supporters, and state policymakers.

District leaders must treat financial sustainability as an ongoing responsibility, not an occasional crisis to manage. Until very recently, district leaders could afford, literally and figuratively, to delegate budgets to finance staff and only review the results. That is no longer true. Fiscal pressure is now constant, and the corresponding political management must be constant, too. In this respect, district leaders increasingly resemble business executives who must pay close attention to finances alongside their other priorities.

Taking responsibility in this way means looking ahead and developing clear forecasts of enrollment trends, revenue changes, and rising costs while carefully assessing the long-term costs of service contracts and collective bargaining agreements. It also means prioritizing cuts that reduce costs over time, not just in the year they are made.

District leaders must also come to accept that budget decisions are inherently political, even when administrators would be more comfortable treating them as purely technical. The dollars matter, but so does making sure that teachers, parents, and voters understand the gap between costs and revenues. Leaders must consider the public's interests and concerns, communicate clearly, and compromise when necessary. They need to be honest about the options under consideration and tradeoffs. And they must be proactive, as painful choices around school closures and staff reductions may become unavoidable if problems are deferred rather than addressed.

To do this work well, district leaders need substantial support on both the financial and political sides. Over half of our districts enlisted the help of outside experts since many of their decisions required complex analyses; some relied on consultants to collect data and run the numbers, sometimes using proprietary processes. Smaller districts with limited in-house capacity and larger districts where a neutral outside perspective may carry more weight can benefit significantly from external expertise. Leaders, especially those new to the district, will also need support navigating and building relationships with community groups. One approach is to seek out mentors in civic and business communities who can help them understand the various constituent groups and their interests, which can improve leaders' budgetary decision-making.

Support on the revenue side matters, too. Some districts have found modest but meaningful ways to diversify their income through leasing space in underutilized buildings or selling services to charter schools or homeschooling families.

States also have an important role to play, regardless of whether they provide additional funding. When states *can* offer more money, they should do so in ways that allow districts to have accurate, reliable forecasts of how much new funding they'll receive and when. If states foster unrealistic hopes about providing additional dollars, then they push districts into making plans based on revenue that never materializes. Straightforward, honest communication from states about future funding levels gives local leaders the stable foundation they need to plan responsibly.

When additional funding is not available, states can still play a constructive role, though it requires a different kind of honesty. If no money is forthcoming, then state leaders should say so and refute any claims to the contrary. Additionally, states that are clear about when and why a district will be considered insolvent and taken over can actually strengthen local leaders' cases for difficult cuts.

In less extreme instances, states can also ease the path for local leaders by offering waivers or exemptions from rules that constrain their options, such as funding use restrictions, class size requirements, or last-in-first-out layoff policies. Districts then have the flexibility they need to make cuts that are both fiscally sound and educationally defensible.

Ultimately, the districts that weathered these crises most successfully were not the ones with the most resources, but the ones whose leaders merged political and financial strategies. Leaders who master both stand the best chance of steering their districts through hard times without losing community trust.

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Any errors or omissions remain our own.

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Front cover image: Rapides Parish Schools Superintendent Jeffery Powell addresses the district's teachers, administrators, and community leaders at their annual Opening of Schools Meeting. Courtesy of Rapides Parish Schools.

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