# Managing Resources to Focus on Student Performance

## A Case Study of an Efficiency and Effectiveness Review Process

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Challenging economic times are creating a fiscal environment in states, districts, and schools across the country that confronts school boards, superintendents, principals, and other education leaders with difficult decisions of unprecedented magnitude. Policy leaders and taxpayers are asking where and how to reduce spending in order to balance budgets. All of these groups are dealing with limited resources while struggling to ensure that students enjoy a richly rigorous and relevant education experience *and* demonstrate continuous improvement. In our own state of Maine – where education budgets have always been a challenge – state government has just cut $27 million from education spending.

Not all of the districts and schools across the country that are navigating these swirling currents are dealing with the crisis in the same way. Some are exemplars of efficient and effective stewardship of public education that balance fiscal prudence with student-centeredness. However, too often budgetary decisions about what to keep, what to cut, what to modify, and what to postpone are made without connecting expenditures to results or without correlating cost to maximum student benefit. Too often, fiscal allocations are based on entrenched self-interest, inertia, compliance or past practice without due consideration of what actually adds measurable value for students by enhance learning and engagement – and therefore student achievement – within their classrooms. Inputs are not connected with outputs. Other jurisdictions are not effectively communicating the complexity of the issues – financial as well as academic achievement-related – to staff and stakeholders. Still others are not transparently communicating their budget-related decision-making processes, nor their measured, balanced, and strategic responses to those issues.

As education leaders who have served at the school, district, and now state levels, we have had first-hand experience in guiding an administrative team of school principals, program directors, an adult education director, a transportation director, a business manager, and a facilities manager through a process that provided a comprehensive review of the district's vision, goals, systems, and student performance data to balance costs and expenses with effectiveness. We identified best practices, compared them to available resources, and made strategic decisions that optimized value to stakeholders as well as to students. That process helped us to achieve an appropriate and sustainable balance of efficiency (optimal use of limited resources) and effectiveness (higher student engagement and performance).

We want to share part of a true story that harkens back to the days when we were superintendent and assistant superintendent in the Windham School Department in Maine. We hope that our brief description of the process we used will be helpful – helpful in changing the conversation about how to maximize learning at a time when the challenges of declining resources actually creates an opportunity for principals, superintendents, and teachers to really redesign the system, and an opportunity for us to think about – and do – things differently.

The Windham School Department is located in Windham, Maine, in Cumberland County, just north of Portland. Today, the district's five schools serve 2,857 students in grades K-12, 97% of whom are White (close to the state average), 1% are African-American, and less than 1% each are Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Native American students. A total of 14% of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. The student-teacher ratio for the 2006-07 school year was 13:1, compared to the state average of 12:1.

## A Seven-Step Review Process

Coming to terms with the realities of efficiency and effectiveness in Windham started for us during the 2002-04 economic slowdown. Budgetary realities, coupled with both the (then) relatively new, but mandated and largely still unexplored, accountabilities of *No Child Left Behind* and the Maine state assessment program. That confluence forced us to re-examine the realities of both higher student performance and greater fiscal accountability. We soon realized that what was needed was a new paradigm in district decision making and that such a shift in thinking would mean coming to grips with many of the old vested interests, sacred cows, personal agendas, targeted funding sources, and entrenched beliefs about what mattered most and about how – efficiently and effectively – to prioritize our budget accordingly.

What follows is a description of the process, the product, and the mindset that emerged.

**Step 1: Clear articulation of the district vision, mission, and goals**

As a first step, our administrative team reviewed the existing district vision, mission, and goals to solidify understanding and renew agreement, and to ensure that all new recommendations would advance those stated goals and would be tied to clear performance indicators anchored by student performance data. The purpose in bringing clarity to this exercise was to guarantee that we had consensus agreement *prior* to engaging each of the district schools' staff members in a comprehensive review of their individual buildings. A major focus that emerged for us was to build our capacity as a K-12 team to:

- think and act systemically
- capture and leverage the knowledge and skills of our diverse team
- create a system-wide response that would be:
  - consistent with the district's core values and consensus-based primary beliefs about education, and with our core goals
  - based on data analysis
  - a reflection of our strengths and assets
  - transparent about spending decisions
  - constantly building the trust that would enable the team to invest wisely and responsibly in our students' futures

In Windham, we identified and agreed upon several explicit and non-negotiable outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, character, and graduation rates. (Public support and student satisfaction are two additional, measurable outcomes that other schools and districts might want to consider.) More importantly, we had clear and frank conversations about what initiatives and activities would most clearly helped us to produce student growth in each of those outcomes.

**Step 2: Analysis of student data to determine who is succeeding and who might need additional resources to achieve successfully**

Our principals and directors provided each of their staff members with a compilation of the district's data on the students in their schools. Each member of the team was charged with guiding his or her staff in a comprehensive analysis of which students were:

- doing well as indicated by academic results
- had needs that were not being met as indicated by teacher observation as well as by student feedback and survey data
- not being challenged and stretched to their fullest potential
- had social, emotional health, or other needs that were not being met

Leaders then asked staff members to examine "inputs and outputs," that is, to determine what practices and resources the teachers and staff could document that were supporting and enhancing student success. For example, did classroom technology have a positive impact on student learning? If so, how? Was there evidence to support the statement? What evidence? Were textbooks positively impacting student learning? What supporting evidence was available? Did students feel that the adults in their schools cared about them and really wanted them to be successful? How did we know? Using this analysis, the staff of each school collectively prioritized the needs and strengths of the school by grade and program and sought to determine what inputs produced positive measurable outputs – and which did not.

In Windham's process, the teachers also clustered the students into groups – special education students, English language learners, gifted and talented, and others – and gave us suggestions about what was working and what was not working for each group. All of that data came back to the administrative team for analysis and action.

**Step 3: Mapping of the district's needs and strengths**

The administrative team reconvened to share the information collected from the team members' individual buildings, to create a district-wide profile of strengths and weaknesses, and to identify a series of priorities aligned with the district goals.

When we considered resources that our own school system had, we recognized quickly that – typical of most districts across the nation – approximately 80% of the total resources were personnel costs. Windham's team looked at the K-12 needs for the system and collectively concluded that the greatest need for resources was in early childhood education and therefore we decided that we would, in fact, focus our staff resources in K-2. We agreed to ensure that our K-2 students would receive additional support, and in doing so we needed to make some key decisions. One of those decisions and one action that we could take without needing any additional resources was to assign our youngest and most needy students to our most talented teachers.

To do this, we needed additional data such as:

- Which teachers produced the highest and most consistent results?
- What effective instructional practices in those teachers' (and other teachers') classrooms should be provided to those younger and more needful students we wanted to target?
- How can training in those and other effective practices become part of the district's and its schools' professional development plans for all teachers? In Maine, for example, use of one-

to-one computer-based learning and technology with a key focus on improving literacy was determined to be an effective best practice across the state. Accordingly, at the school level, training in literacy-focused instructional technology became part of the professional development program.

The resulting plan that we put forward was to change our placement strategies. That tactic didn't require money or additional personnel, but it gave our most needful students our most successful teachers – those who had a history of students who, when they left those classrooms, were at or above grade level in reading and mathematics proficiency.

**Step 4: Identification of financial resources and costs**

The team identified all local, state, and federal funding sources and resources. The team also defined the costs associated with each activity, program, resource, and intervention that they identified as having a positive impact on student success. In the process, the team developed a philosophy of "braiding" resources to achieve maximum effectiveness.

Specifically, we considered local budgets and state funding as well as how we used federal funds. As we built our budget, we examined the revenues we received as a district and determined how we might maximize best practices and integrate or "braid" our funding revenues without violating federal requirements. We also referred to a series of analyses and rubrics developed by the Maine State Department of Education to evaluate and help allocate budgeting on essential programs and services. View the Maine Essential Programs and Services website at www.maine.gov/education/data/eps/fy09/eps0809.html.

In our case, we used local resources to pay for teacher salaries and classroom materials. Federal resources were dedicated to providing specialized instructional support for our K-3 classrooms. We examined our data, identified a literacy program that had solid evidence of improving student reading scores, and wrote our Title I program application to allow the district to hire and train para-professionals for this literacy program.

We designed a schedule that provided every classroom with a para-professional who possessed this specialized training. By adding a para-professional we reduced the student-teacher ratio and increased the amount of small group interaction during the 90-minute reading block. In most instances, this change resulted in a 10:1 ratio during the reading block.

Title I, Title II, and special education funding helped to support professional development. So often in larger school systems one person writes the federal applications and principals develop their building level budgets. Using this braided approach, we identified all resources and developed a plan to maximize the districts goals, and in doing so used funds efficiently and maximized the implementation of best practices effectively.

As the teacher and para-professional worked together, our data demonstrated gains greater than those obtained from prior models in which students had historically been pulled from the classroom and given instruction by another individual. In the previous model, six literacy teachers served children in grades 1-8 for about 20-30 minutes per day. In our new model, we hired 30 para-professionals (in most cases these were B.S.-level teachers who wanted to work part-time) and increased the support – not only for our most at-risk students, but also for all students in the classroom – to 90 minutes per day. The new model also provided increased professional development for all staff.

**Step 5: Development of budget recommendations**

The team developed a budget proposal for the district that was based on:

- a clear understanding of the goals
- the action steps that would be taken for each group of students or each grade level
- the resources that needed to be provided
- well-defined indicators to measure the outcome of these decisions based on a comprehensive analysis of student data.

All previous budget allocations were deemed “off the table.”

**Step 6: Creation of a transparent, evidence-based decision-making budget**

As leaders of the district, we worked closely with the board of education to educate and inform its trustees and the public about the criteria the team had used to develop the budget recommendations. Every decision was directly tied to the goals and the ability of the recommendation to improve student performance.

As described previously, the initial premise and goal of this process was to ensure that the public’s investment in our education system would produce a focused, quantifiable return in improved student achievement. Equally important, we wanted to ensure that the public *perceived* that our activities and spending were generating value through an objective, tracked return on investment. Perceptions *are* reality and they must be nurtured with both honesty and candor. The team, therefore, needed to be resolutely clear in its communications and transparent in its activities. By doing so, the team builds confidence in the education system and wins over the minds and hearts (not to mention, the pocketbooks) of the board, as well as the teachers, parents, and other citizens and stakeholders within the community.

At Windham we made every effort to keep teachers, the teacher union, parents, and the community as a whole informed as we worked through our process. We welcomed their input and sometimes eager offers of cooperation and volunteerism – not just for their practical value in helping facilitate our project, but also as a consensus- and community-building process – a practice that always needs to be strengthened, especially in times of fiscal crisis. Principals were encouraged to “know their teachers” and their teachers’ perceptions of the process as it emerged. Community forums and a parent advisory were also established to engage external stakeholders in the process and to collect their opinions and ideas.

We also tried to build a new structure with the school board so that – as opposed to merely approving a budget based on “here’s the dollar amount for elementary, middle school, and high school” – we started with the outcomes that we were trying to achieve and challenged our board to help us create a new paradigm for decision making – a paradigm that any future budget decisions could be based on. We asked:

- Did that expenditure help us to advance achievement of the stated goals and desired outcomes?
- How should we measure the impact of that investment in future years?

**Step 7: Continuous monitoring and benchmarking of performance indicators and expenses**

The same management process and tools that allowed the building-level leaders to articulate clearly the goals, initiatives, persons responsible for each action plan, timelines, and resources also assist the principal or program director in monitoring, and/or adjusting the plan of action where and when needed. Furthermore, this shared process tool also permits the administrators to report on the results – the return on investment – at the end of the year, as well as to make mid-course adjustments should changing and continuously monitored data indicate the need for such action.

With each of Windham's initiatives, we identified the core activities and the costs associated with each of those activities and we created a means to track the impact of the activities over time. Inputs are measured against outputs, interventions against results, resource allocations against productivity – with the overarching objective being the "care management" of all of our 3,000 students. Ideally, tracking will eventually be done with a real-time, online tool that a principal could use on a daily basis to see what is actually improving students' results and what isn't. Quick yet reasoned decisions about what to inspect, what to value, what to continue, what to eliminate, or what to adjust could then be made.

## Conclusion

As we think about efficiency (in the use of resources) and effectiveness (in improving student engagement and learning) as the key criteria for developing a comprehensive plan for a district or school to use in improving student performance, clearly the starting point needs to be making sure that the district and/or every school is explicitly clear about its mission. Then, the outcomes chosen – ideally only a manageable few, perhaps as few as five or six – need to be selected based on what will most directly impact that mission. The district or school must analyze every activity to ensure its clear fit with its intended outcomes.

Windham's experience – while neither unique nor flawless in its design or execution – illustrates what a small district in a state with limited resources and few fiscal options can do to anticipate and manage fiscal challenges while maintaining, renewing, and enhancing its steadfast commitment to serving the needs of its students.

**Susan Gendron** assumed the role of Commissioner of Education for the state of Maine in 2003–after having spent her entire professional career serving education at the local, state, and national levels. In her current position as the chief education advisor to Governor John E. Baldacci, she has heralded a new school funding formula, a reorganization of the state's school systems, and secondary school reform; advanced a world-renowned one-to-one technology program for grades 7-12 and an early childhood education program; and created a four-state collaborative to advance secondary education.

An educator since 1973, Susan has been a teacher, principal (elementary and high school), special education director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent of schools. She serves on a variety of boards, including the Council of Chief State School Officers as its president-elect, Chairperson for the Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory, Maine's Compact for Higher Education, Coalition for Excellence in Education, Trustee for the Maine's University System and the Community College System, and Hebron Academy.

Susan has presented at the state, national, and international levels as a champion for financial reform of local and state budgets, the importance of providing technology at the point of learning, early childhood

education, high school reform, the importance of the arts in education, and for building strong learning organizations that prepare our students for the demands of the international society.

**Angela Faherty**, Ph.D., is a skilled educational leader and strategic planner. Her current role as Deputy Commissioner for the state of Maine draws upon a wealth of experiences as classroom teacher, special education teacher, teacher of gifted/talented, director of gifted/talented programs, special education director, and assistant superintendent.

Dr. Faherty has demonstrated expertise in curriculum, assessment, instruction and policy development. She provides consultation to a diverse group of educators for leadership and budget development in order to bridge the gap between outcomes and vision. She has a proven record for managing innovative and creative projects from conception to completion. Her expertise in financial reforms have led to innovative programs in special education, early childhood programs, professional development, and providing access to Advanced Placement courses to all students. Angela has served the education needs of diverse geographic communities including New York City, Utah, Missouri, Iowa and Maine. Throughout her service, she has provided expertise in fiscal management of grants that has yielded creative opportunities for states, districts, and local schools to utilize their resources for outstanding results.

As Deputy Commissioner for the Maine Department of Education she has helped to create new systems for budget reforms while cultivating support for innovations through High School Re-design, Assessment and Accountability structures, use of technology and collaborations with Workforce Development, the Department of Labor, and Health and Human Services. Angela is involved in national forums through the Deputy Leadership Commission with the Council of Chief State School Officers that informs federal policy development. Her interests and expertise are in educator development and reinventing accountability structures that reflect authentic measures of achievement that matter. Angela is committed to principle-centered leadership that builds on the moral authority to create conditions that are deliberately calculated for student effectiveness while establishing the public trust that comes from efficient use of public funds.