



Parent, Student and Resident Answers to Open-Ended Budget Survey Questions

January & February 2009

With school districts across Oregon facing deep budget cuts due to the ongoing economic recession, Eugene School District 4J asked stakeholders in our community to provide input on how the district can weather the coming budget crisis. Community members responded strongly. In addition to ranking budget cut options listed by the survey's designers, several hundred parents and taxpayers provided earnest and creative responses to open-ended questions. These answers provided information about what programs and services were their top priorities to maintain, where they thought the district could eliminate or reduce offerings, and other ways to gain efficiencies and reduce expenses.

2 | Are there some other programs, services or activities, or district initiatives we should maintain as a high priority as we struggle with balancing the district budget?

Of the 1,667 community members, most of them parents, who participated in this survey, 651 answered Question #21 to provide additional input on the programs they consider to be the highest priority.

In comparison with the staff members who responded to this question, the community respondents placed a much higher emphasis on foreign language instruction and immersion programs, challenging programs such as Advanced Placement courses and the International High School programs, talented and gifted programs, math and

science instruction, and alternative schools and the school choice policy. Many community members said after-school programs were important, though this was mentioned only twice by staff members.

Arts, music and physical education were highly valued by community members, as they were by 4J staff. Some parents mentioned the importance of reading programs, English language learner services, services to children with special needs, counselors and psychologists, behavior support specialists, and nurses and health services, but these

areas were emphasized more by staff members.

The services and programs that were most important to community members who completed the survey are listed in approximate descending order of frequency:

Instructional Time and Classroom Ratio:

A top concern of parents and community members was maintaining instructional time. Many expressed concern about Oregon's and 4J's already-low number of instructional hours, with several specific complaints about frequent no-school and early-release days. A number of respondents specifically opposed four-day school weeks, noting the pressure that schedule places on working parents, while others expressed support for shortening the school year or school weeks, especially if each day is lengthened to maintain instructional time.

Maintaining the teacher/student ratio also was highly valued by many respondents. Several noted that class sizes already are higher than ideal.

Art, Music, Performing Arts:

Dozens of community members advocated for continuing the art, music, performing arts, speech and debate, physical education, and other instruction that enriches education in 4J beyond the core academic subjects. Many respondents noted that these areas already have been cut deeply, and that it is important to them to maintain the level of service that remains.

Physical Education:

Parents overwhelmingly valued physical education for all students over extracurricular athletics for some. Several respondents cited the role of PE in combating widespread obesity and the resultant health concerns, and a few noted that physical activity facilitates learning. Extracurricular sports were frequently mentioned for cuts, but a handful of community members weighed in to support athletics funding, some of them citing concerns that reducing funding would make team sports accessible only to privileged children.

Math and Science:

Science, math and technology were cited many times as areas that should be maintained and improved, with several community members pointing out these subjects' importance to the future of our economy, our nation and our world. Although many respondents noted elsewhere that delaying implementation of a new math curriculum would be one way to reduce expenses, several parents complained that the current math curriculum is inadequate and confusing.

Back to Basics:

Many comments were received urging the district to focus on core instruction areas, especially reading, writing, math and science. Some respondents specifically suggested cutting elective classes, cultural programs, diversity programs, and aid to lower-income schools and struggling students to focus on teaching the three Rs to all students.

Language Instruction and Immersion Programs:

Both language immersion schools and foreign language classes in neighborhood schools received a great deal of support

from community members responding to this question. Several respondents specifically mentioned the importance of continuing to offer German classes, now available at only one school.

TAG Programs & Challenging Curriculum:

A large number of comments were received regarding the importance of maintaining or improving offerings for students identified as talented and gifted. Many respondents stated that existing services already seem minimal at best and should not be cut any further. Some cited concerns about gifted students dropping out of school due to boredom and frustration. Advanced Placement courses, the International High Schools, and other challenging courses available to all students also were considered important by several community members who took the survey.

After-School Programs:

Programs such as ACE and BEST were important to many families responding to the survey. Several people noted that after-school programs are vital to working parents.

School Choice and Alternative Schools:

Numerous respondents weighed in to urge the school district to maintain the school choice policy in 4J. Several stated that they value the alternative schools and the variety of programs offered by Eugene's neighborhood schools.

Reading Programs:

Programs to improve reading skills were mentioned by many parents and other community members as important to maintain.

Special Education and Support Services:

Maintaining programs to support students with special needs and help students not performing at grade level were highly valued by several respondents.

Equity:

Several community members emphasized the importance of efforts to close the achievement gap and increase equity. Three respondents specifically lauded the MSAN program. Some respondents mentioned the achievement gap between students of different races, while others focused on aid to schools serving students of lower average socioeconomic status. While several respondents who mentioned equity were supportive of continuing efforts, others specifically called for cuts in these areas.

Teacher Quality:

Several respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining or improving teacher quality and support, especially in the face of cuts elsewhere in the school system.

Miscellaneous:

Other topics called out as the highest priority for at least a few respondents included services to English language learners, focusing on neighborhood schools, speech and debate, libraries, teacher training, instructional technology, services to at-risk students, counseling, family support services, school nurses and health services, school security and police, behavioral intervention, energy efficiency and environmental programs, not making shortsighted administration cuts, vocational education (catering, welding, shop), building maintenance, and bus transportation.

22 Are there other programs, services or activities, or district initiatives we should consider eliminating or reducing as we struggle to balance the budget?

The 518 community members who responded to Question #22 had many ideas for programs, services and activities that could be reduced or eliminated. Across many topics, participants frequently noted that it would be better to scale back programs rather than eliminate them entirely, in order to allow services to return after the economic crisis is over. Several stated that it would be better to cut school days and/or athletics, which will be certain to be a top priority for reinstatement in future years, rather than lose programs such as music instruction, perhaps forever.

By far the most frequently suggested area for budget reductions was athletics funding and travel for athletic competitions. This was distantly followed (in descending order) by many other suggestions.

Athletics Funding:

Extracurricular sports were far and away the top choice for budget reductions. About one-fourth of all respondents suggested cutting athletics funding overall or reducing costs by playing close to home. Sports were suggested for cuts more than three times as often as the next most popular choice.

Several dozen survey participants suggested reducing or eliminating funding for athletics programs. Dozens more specified team travel for competitions as an area to cut. A dozen respondents specifically suggested dropping out of OSAA and playing locally, while several others urged the district to lobby OSAA to make leagues more local, or limit high school sizes to make South Eugene and Sheldon fit into the 5A classification.

Many participants said they were reluctant to reduce funding for sports, but felt there is no choice but to cut athletics before cutting academics. Several people also noted that extracurricular sports are a voluntary extra in which only a small minority of 4J students participate. Numerous respondents pointed out that funding can be reduced without cutting sports if parents and local boosters step up to the plate in response to fundraising efforts.

About 20 additional respondents suggested cutting extracurricular programs in addition to athletics.

Delay Curriculum, Textbook, Technology Purchases:

Forty respondents asked the district to delay or drop plans to implement new curricula or buy new books. Twenty-two more suggested technology purchases as an area to cut. Many of these people indicated that new curricula and classroom technology were a nice “extra” but could be delayed without major negative impact to the students. A few suggested discarding curriculum changes and computers altogether and getting “back to basics.” Some, however, expressed concern that schools’ technology will quickly become outdated if cuts are made in this area, and several parents expressed their dislike of the current math curriculum and expressed hope it could be replaced soon.

Slash No-School Days:

An extremely frequent response regarded the district’s high number of no-school days for grading, class prep and professional development. Most respondents seemed to think the days allotted for such purposes are excessive; a few acknowledged the

value of such days but indicated teachers should give up grading or professional days before cutting school days.

Some parents complained that, even when school is in session, too many class periods are devoted to “movie days” or are otherwise not instructional. Additional respondents said teachers should stay in the classroom when classes are scheduled and reduce spending on substitute teachers. They suggested that teachers should not attend trainings and meetings during class time but that these should instead be scheduled outside of class time. Others mentioned the days recently added to elementary school principals’ work year as an area to cut.

Close and Consolidate Schools:

Dozens of parents and other community members indicated their support for closing some schools to reduce costs. Most said to close schools or close small elementary schools without offering additional detail, but several had specific suggestions for schools to close. Specific mentions included eliminating non-immersion alternative schools, cutting immersion programs, closing charter schools, consolidating alternative high schools, and closing a high school or some middle schools. A handful of respondents named individual small elementary and middle schools for closure. A few respondents argued that small schools offer unique benefits and requested such schools be preserved.

Close Some Alternative Programs:

Several survey participants singled out alternative programs for cuts, with some suggesting that the programs be winnowed and others saying all alternative schools should be closed. However, other participants weighed in on the other side, saying that past efforts to close or merge alternative schools have been a significant waste of district and parent resources that could be better used elsewhere.

Shrink Staff Travel and Training Costs:

Specific suggestions included barring out-of-state travel for conferences, canceling staff retreats, eliminating paid speakers, cutting trainings and workshops, and not purchasing refreshments for trainings or meetings.

Cut Central Administration Costs:

Some respondents simply suggested cutting administration, while others listed specific ways to save money, including instituting pay freezes, temporarily reducing highly paid administrators’ or board members’ salaries or benefits, reducing supplies budgets, mandating unpaid furloughs, reducing the number of teachers on special assignment in administrative positions, and so on.

Eliminate or Streamline Transportation Services:

While a few respondents suggested cutting bus services entirely, most who mentioned transportation thought the system could be made more efficient in some way. Specific suggestions included increasing the travel distance at which students are eligible for transportation; charging a fee for bus services; organizing bus routes more efficiently (several mentioned frequently seeing large buses carrying one or two children); using smaller, more

fuel-efficient vehicles; streamlining school and bus schedules to increase efficiencies; postponing fleet replacements; outsourcing transportation to a private company; and eliminating the \$500 sign-up bonus to become a bus driver, as it may not be needed during a recession.

Reduce Services to English Language Learners:

Several participants listed ELL services as an area to be reduced or eliminated, while others suggested volunteers be used to supplement paid staff.

Pay Freezes, Wage Reductions or Benefit Rollbacks:

Personnel cost reductions were frequently mentioned. Some thought that reducing wages and benefits could help avoid layoffs. Several survey respondents urged immediate pay freezes or reductions for all personnel, while others specified employee groups they thought should accept pay freezes.

Cut School Days:

Shortened school years were mentioned by many respondents as a good place to make cuts that could be easily recovered in future years, although many others opposed any reduction in instructional time. Some thought school day reductions were more equitable than cutting specific services and programs. Several people urged the district to cut days strategically, rather than just ending the school year early.

Implement Four-Day Week:

Four-day weeks received some of the strongest opinions on both sides of the issue, with several dozen participants commenting. Many respondents cited this strategy as an excellent way to cut costs, while many others specifically opposed restructuring school weeks. Numerous parents noted that, between early release days and no-school days, they feel 4J is close to having four-day weeks already. Others cited the difficulty of finding and affording childcare for one day a week. Some suggested that staff meetings, professional development, athletics and other extracurricular activities be scheduled on the no-school day each week, so that they would not interfere with class time.

Reduce Testing:

Multiple parents noted the amount of class time that is devoted to testing throughout the year; some suggested eliminating the district-specific tests that are not required by the state.

Drop Positive Behavioral Support:

The Positive Behavioral Support program was listed by several participants as a place to reduce expenses; some said it has not been effective and should be eliminated entirely, while others thought it was a good idea but should be cut before other areas.

Cut Diversity and Equity Programs:

Several participants suggested making cuts to diversity curricula and programs, as well as efforts to increase racial and socioeconomic equity.

Trim School Administration:

Specific suggestions included one principal for every two elementary schools; reconsidering separate principals for small schools within a high school; and requiring each school administrator to teach one class every term.

Reduce Services to Students with Special Needs:

Some participants suggested the district reduce mainstreaming and merge programs within schools to use staff more efficiently. One community member thought that funding for costly services to students with special needs should be an obligation of the state or federal government, not of each school district. Others simply suggested this as an area to be cut without specifying how.

Novel Themes:

Community members suggested several areas for cuts that had not been listed as options in the first part of the survey. New themes that emerged in this question included:

- Cut paid work days for teachers when schools are closed (e.g. grading days, professional development days).
- Reduce transportation costs by cutting bus services or making them more efficient in some way.
- Reduce or delay classroom technology purchases.
- Close some alternative programs.
- Reduce ELL instruction.
- Implement pay freezes and/or wage reductions for all 4J staff.
- Reduce employee benefits (retirement, insurance, vacation).
- Cap or reduce pay for higher-paid administrators.
- Implement energy efficiency and resource conservation measures.
- Remove or replace ineffective teachers.
- Limit specialist positions and teachers on special assignment.
- Drop or reduce funding for Positive Behavioral Support.
- Reduce time spent on testing.
- Utilize volunteers more.
- Cut budgets for diversity and equity programs.
- Reduce services to children with special needs, perhaps by reconsidering mainstreaming efforts.
- Cut services to at-risk youth or students with behavioral issues.
- Offer fewer field trips.
- Eliminate after-school programs or make them self-supporting.
- Outsource groundskeeping, maintenance or transportation.
- Increase centralization of purchasing or management.
- Reduce TAG programs.
- Eliminate one or more charter schools.
- Stop school choice.
- Stop trying to close alternative programs.
- Cut food service costs—eliminate free lunch, scale back options, increase price, use local vendors, stop Sodexo contract.
- Drop Tripod survey, other data collection efforts.
- Reduce or eliminate language instruction in non-immersion elementary and middle schools.
- Reduce funding for or eliminate International High Schools.
- Eliminate free periods for high schoolers.
- Have parents and students be responsible for tidying classrooms and caring for grounds.
- Don't purchase refreshments for meetings and events.
- Have fewer school assemblies.
- Cut extra funding to academy and Title schools.
- Eliminate the small schools program at North Eugene.
- Lower or stop extra pay to teachers; cut overtime costs.
- Merge with Bethel and/or Springfield school district.
- Eliminate any funding to HomeSource.

23 Are there some other efficiency measures or cost-saving ideas we should consider as we struggle to balance the district budget?

A total of 748 community members weighed in with ideas on how the district could improve efficiency and reduce expenses. Examples listed in the question were courier/mail services on alternate days, increasing rental fees and usage charges, using surplus property as a revenue source, adjusting transportation distances, four-day school weeks, alternative education program and drop-out recovery consolidation/reorganization, and energy conservation measures in all buildings. Every item listed as a possibility received many positive responses, with energy conservation generating the most enthusiastic and creative response.

Survey respondents suggested many additional ways to save money, and numerous contributors also shared ideas for increasing revenue. Some of these creative ideas follow:

Go Green—Improve Energy Efficiency:

Participants had several creative ideas for energy conservation, from turning off lights to cutting school days in the winter rather than in the spring to save on heating and lighting. Specific suggestions included partnering with the UO to identify energy inefficiencies; increasing energy awareness in schools so students and teachers consistently turn out lights, shut down computers, and close doors and windows; using natural light during the day; lowering thermostats; adjusting the school day and/or school year to have more school hours and days during daylight and warmer weather; installing rooftop solar panels on all schools; replacing old windows and incandescent lights with more energy-efficient options; planting trees to shade hot classrooms; installing auto-off lights in restrooms and putting automatic switches on electrical devices to turn them off at night.

Go Green—Conserve All Resources:

Several parents also noted schools and central departments could greatly reduce the use of paper and other resources.

Suggested ways to conserve paper included using two-sided printing; eliminating duplication of materials for multi-child families; moving from paper to online distribution of information to families (either allowing families to “opt in” and request electronic distribution instead of paper, or making the switch for everyone who does not “opt out” by requesting a paper copy of all communications); increasing use of blogs and wikis and other online tools in lieu of sending paper home; using the autodialer instead of sending notes to parents; and calling on staff to be more paper-conscious and reduce unnecessary printing.

Others called for schools to save money by implementing other environmentally friendly practices, such as adopting “green school” programs district-wide; installing efficient and/or automatic faucets, toilets and soap dispensers to reduce water consumption; reducing lawns and ornamental plants, and planting native species and ecolawns in their place, to reduce both maintenance and water costs; recycling or composting lunch wastes; eliminating hot lunches; eliminating bus transportation (encouraging kids to walk, bike, or ride LTD instead); and setting up a system to reuse and recycle previous years’ school supplies.

Use Graduate Students and Interns:

Respondents suggested utilizing more education majors and graduate students in classrooms to help teachers, while also giving the university students experience in the classroom.. One specific student was to have a practicum student teach one day a week, allowing the licensed teacher to have an office day.

Rely on Volunteers:

Many survey participants promoted the use of volunteers to save on labor costs. Some suggested requiring or encouraging a certain amount of volunteer hours from each family, as is done at some private schools; others suggested tapping the abundance of expertise and availability in our retired and professional community. Specific areas for volunteer support included building and ground maintenance, help with English language learners, experienced volunteers to help with professional development, a volunteer arts program, work in school offices or other areas where an extended education is not necessary, supporting athletics, playground aides and hall monitors, and in more extensive roles such as a “technology teaching team” made up of parents with strong computer skills who are integrated into the planned curriculum and assist in classrooms through an entire school year.

Require Student Service:

One source of volunteer assistance that several respondents spontaneously suggested was students themselves. Areas where these respondents thought students—especially high school students—could pitch in included maintenance, custodial work, office help, food preparation and serving, peer counseling, tutoring, one-on-one mentoring of younger students, playground supervision, and help in after-school programs. Respondents cited not only the help this would give to schools, but also the increased sense of community and ownership such service may impart to the youth.

Multiple respondents noted that in some Asian countries it is expected that the children will keep their classrooms tidy, clean hallways and care for the grounds; one suggestion was to have the children responsible for cleaning up after themselves on a daily basis, and reduce staff maintenance and cleaning days to two or three days a week.

Develop Community Partnerships:

Respondents suggested developing or strengthening partnerships with LCC and UO (energy efficiency, concurrent enrollment to enhance opportunities for TAG and other students), OSU Extension (4-H, nutrition education, after-school programs and extended learning opportunities), EWEB (energy efficiency, solar panels), City of Eugene (energy efficiency, grant opportunities, etc.), Lane ESD and other organizations, or public/private partnerships with local businesses, to reduce costs and offer opportunities to students.

Combine School Districts:

To reduce administrative overhead, survey participants suggested mergers of 4J/Bethel, 4J/Bethel/Springfield, or all the school districts in the greater Eugene/Springfield area.

Find New Revenue:

Propose an additional local levy. Hire more grant writers to help get more grant funding; hold grant-writing workshops to help individual schools acquire funding from external sources. Form a volunteer community advisory committee to spearhead grant writing and obtaining additional funding sources. Hire a development officer to raise private money for public school programs. Develop an endowment campaign to help cushion against future budget crises. Ask for donations from businesses. Institute an optional "tuition" as a suggested donation from families. Hold car washes and other fundraisers. Encourage small-scale/low-cost fundraising, such as GoodSearch.com, eScrip, Box Tops for Education, Unique Eugene scrip, etc.

Ensure rental fees are consistently collected; increase rental fees; actively market district rental facilities to increase use; rent out rock wall gyms; encourage rentals for catered events using 4J catering. Turn unused open spaces into community gardens, charge a nominal fee. Open computer labs for public use for a fee (after school hours). Charge student fees for computer use, art classes, etc., with fee waivers available to low-income families. Charge high school students a fee to park their cars on campus.

Shift the Costs:

Several respondents suggested keeping programs active by shifting the costs away from the general fund budget. Suggestions included ensuring all eligible families apply for free/reduced lunch, getting state or federal reimbursement for field trip transportation costs, lobbying for unfunded mandates to be either funded or dropped, and acquiring federal funding for energy conservation.

Make Programs Be Self-Supporting:

Specific suggestions included implementing full-day kindergarten and charging tuition, making athletics and other extracurricular programs become self-supporting through fees and fundraising, charging tuition for after-school programs, charging a transportation fee for school bus services, and implementing a voluntary "tuition" for all students whose parents can afford it. See above regarding strong support for making extracurricular athletics more self-supporting.

Sell or Use Surplus Property:

Many respondents were enthusiastic about selling surplus property or developing such property to generate revenue streams, but others cautioned against selling property in a down market, selling land originally acquired through donation or condemnation, or selling for short-term gains but long-term detriment. Some specifically urged the district to consider the historic importance of Civic Stadium and not just to sell it to the highest bidder; agreements with the YMCA or the City of Eugene were mentioned. A couple of respondents urged the district to work with local non-profit organizations to develop mutually beneficial lease agreements for unused district property.

Streamline School Schedules:

Some parents suggested cutting zero periods, not allowing free periods, getting all the high schools on the same schedule, having all schools be on either trimester or semester schedule rather than a mixture, making kindergarten full-day so grades K-5 are on the same schedule, discontinuing the Wednesday early-release days for elementary schools and having them observe the same grading days as the other schools, and having full-time teachers teach a consistent full-time course load.

Remove or Replace Ineffective Teachers and Staff:

Several respondents suggested removing "bad teachers" and/or implementing some form of "pay for performance" (merit pay). Specific suggestions included "gentle buyouts" or "kind encouragement toward a different career."

Use Substitute Teachers Less:

Respondents suggested canceling class or sending kids to study hall instead of getting subs for high school classes, implementing rewards for healthy behaviors, including sick leave in retirement payouts, and otherwise incentivizing teachers to minimize use of sick leave.

Miscellaneous:

In addition to these primary themes, survey participants offered a vast variety of proposals for how the district could save money in smaller ways. A few examples include:

- Stop newspaper delivery to schools.
- Eliminate any funding to HomeSource..
- Don't produce the annual calendar.
- Quit the Oregon School Board Association.
- Ask vendors for additional discounts where appropriate.
- Get school supplies donated by parents and businesses, particularly banks.
- Stop providing free school supplies.
- Begin making biodiesel in high school labs (LCC does this).
- Give course credit for extracurricular activities.
- Exempt athletes from PE requirements.
- Rein in copy machine costs at schools (negotiate copier contracts at district level; have staff use copy codes to ensure accountability).
- Implement technology-based "distance learning" opportunities.
- Have staff work in one school, not travel between schools.
- Equalize attendance between schools by minimizing transfers, adjusting attendance boundaries, and closing schools.
- Lobby the legislature to allow funding carryover from year to year, to allow schools to save for larger purchases.