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## *Where to Start*

**N**o one in his right mind wakes up one morning and says, “Yessss! Today I get to cut my school’s budget!” With or without stimulus money, the day of serious budget cutting is here, and in every school across the country. The challenge is how to do so and end up with a better program in the process. And how should we spend that stimulus money? Hopefully, it can be spent to stimulate long-lasting improvements without creating a need for ongoing expenditures. It all starts here.

### **ATTITUDE IS IMPORTANT**

When adversity strikes, attitude is important. We can either count ourselves as victims of circumstances beyond our control and waste time grieving and being angry over our plight or we can commit ourselves to making the most of the situation. When cutting budgets, and especially when leading the process, it is essential that we take the high road and make sure that the changes inherent in budget cutting go in the right direction—toward program improvement.

Throughout our short history as a nation, necessity has always been the mother of invention, the driver of learning that leads to new solutions. The tidal wave of inventions during the Westward Movement, World War II, going to the moon, and

*“There is nothing wrong with change, if it is in the right direction.”*

—Winston Churchill

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developing the personal computer are good examples of American ingenuity when called upon. And in public education, are there problems to fix! Until the current economic crisis is resolved and America finds its economic footing in the 21st century, we are likely to be asked to cut our budgets by as much as 35%.

### Emotional Versus Dispassionate Decision Making

The mere hint of the need to cut the budget, or even failing to expand funding to move forward, is a serious morale buster. And understandably so. But if we are to succeed at our task, we must immediately take steps to ensure that emotions won't hijack our ability to think clearly.<sup>1</sup>

To shift the playing field, two elements are essential: community building and group process.

### *Community Building*<sup>2</sup>

To make and live with the decisions needed to cut your budget requires the following:

- Building a sense of community—in which the sense of belonging drives a desire to work toward the common good
- Creating common ground—in which everyone is empowered to speak and all listen with respect; this creates the basis for influence that matters and influence that works for the common good
- Taking action—commitment to be an active participant in decision making and the integrity to implement the decisions made by the group(s) responsible for making the decisions (whether or not we were a member of that particular committee)

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”*

—Margaret Mead

A sense of community doesn't just happen. It requires initial work and day-by-day monitoring and reinforcing. There are countless books on this subject, a topic well beyond the scope of this book. However, one of the resources specifically designed for school communities, one with a 30-year track record, is the TRIBES work and training

by Jeanne Gibbs. (See *Reaching All by Creating TRIBES Learning Communities*. Windsor, CA: CenterSource Systems, 2006.)<sup>3</sup>

Another effective training for school communities is the restitution social development work of Diane Gossen. (See *Creating the Conditions: Leadership for Quality Schools* by Diane Gossen and Judy Anderson. Chapel Hill, NC: New View Publications, 1995.)<sup>4</sup>

Whatever training program you choose, do it. And stick with it. The work you do here will make or break all that you do.

### *Group Process*

Planning how a group will work together has at least three goals:

- Nurturing community building
- Getting the group through the work at hand in the most effective and efficient way possible
- Building understanding of the decisions reached and raising commitment to implement them

Leading groups through high-emotion, high-stakes work requires skill and believable neutrality. This is also a field filled with thousands of books and hundreds of models. My favorite model, because of its power and simplicity, is that developed by Bruce Tuckman in 1965. The forming, storming, norming, and performing stages of group development, according to Tuckman,<sup>5</sup> are all necessary and inevitable for the team to grow, face up to challenges, tackle problems, find solutions, plan work, and deliver results. Each has its demands on the group facilitator—agenda planning, facilitating the meeting, and follow-up.

An effective group facilitator is a must. Either look for someone in the community who is willing to donate his or her time or provide facilitator training for a staff member who is respected as an effective listener.

An important element in group process is establishing and sticking to ground rules such as the following:

***Ground Rule 1:*** After sincere acknowledgment of the emotions,<sup>6</sup> establish a “no whining” rule. As our mothers used to say, “If you don’t have something nice (in this case, constructive) to say, don’t say anything.”

Establish an agreed-upon hand signal for group members to use to remind the person speaking that he or she is slipping into whining. Stay positive. Negativity will kill the group and stymie your efforts.

***Ground Rule 2:*** No looking back. Conduct a formal burial ceremony. For example, have each participant write on a small piece of paper what upsets him or her most. Set a paper-shredder on a table in the middle of the group and ask each person to “let it go” for good as he or she runs the memento through shredder. Or if an outdoor ceremony is preferred, place the paper slips in a paper bag and bury it or burn it. Make an agreement to move on together.

***Ground Rule 3:*** Avoid the easy way out. Don’t accept simple solutions that were created for earlier situations (which thus might make them seem more acceptable). To end up with a better program, a straightforward, unflinching approach must be taken. Of course, it won’t be easy. But it’s doable.

## ACTION ITEMS

### Action Item A: Gather a leadership team<sup>7</sup> and set ground rules

*“Start by doing what’s necessary; then do what’s possible. Suddenly, you are doing the impossible.”*

—St. Francis of Assisi

If you don’t already have one, form a collaborative leadership team to serve as a steering committee as quickly as you can. Include the principal, vice principal(s), teachers, other certificated and classified staff, parents, and, at secondary levels, students. The membership of this team

should be considered a good representation of the stakeholders at your school. Set the tone and the ground rules for schoolwide discussions.

Determine how to best acknowledge the disappointment, frustration, and anger that program disruption and change will engender. Then, quickly move on to productive discussions about *what to keep*, *what to cut*, and *what will be needed* to make what’s left work well, even better than before. Keep the vision that this new program can be even better than before.

*Ground rules for working together are essential to the decision-making process.*

Establish ground rules for your leadership team and post them in the room each time your group meets. Briefly remind the group of them as you start to work.

### Action Item B: Clarify the purpose

Clearly establish who must be protected during budget cutting. Students and the quality of their learning environment must be the first and primary criteria for all decisions.<sup>8</sup>

Admittedly, this will be a difficult principle to hold to. However, Mr. Spock (of *Star Trek* fame) was right: *The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few*. Recognize that protecting jobs, rigidly holding to last-in, first-out rules, and other such traditions must be set aside. If budget cutting is the necessity and a better program is the goal, all decisions must be based on what is best for *students*.

Appoint a recorder to write down all agreements—policy and procedural. Record in a PowerPoint or Word file that can be forwarded to each group member immediately after the meeting. Begin every subsequent meeting with a review of these agreements (on screen or printed out). Rotate the recorder duties for each meeting.

### Action Item C: Have a game plan

A basic premise of this book is that simply cutting budget—and suffering through with what’s left—is a poor strategy. We must *cut more than enough* so that there is money that can be reinvested in those areas that would significantly improve student outcomes—and lift the spirits of staff and parents.

The best game plan begins with a commitment to improve programs—using re-allocation of some resources after budget cutting as a means to get you there. Use the Strategy-Builder Chart in Figure 1A to help plan your strategy—where to start and where to go, step by step. To create such a game plan, two questions must be answered:

*Simply cutting budget and suffering through with what's left is a poor strategy.*

- Where to cut? Identify the biggest sources of funds that can be cut, especially those expenditures that aren't consistent with brain research.
- Where should we reinvest? Identify areas with a high cost-efficient ratio—a few reinvestment dollars will produce the biggest achievement increases.

The chart (see Figure 1A) answers those questions.<sup>9</sup>

The *first column*—“*Source of \$ to Cut*”—rates the size of funds available for cutting (10 is high).

The *second column*—“*Cost-Efficiency Ratio*”—indicates the potential cost-efficiency ratio when reinvesting funds; in other words, where can a little bit of money buy a significant increase in student achievement (10 is high).

### Strategy-Builder Chart

Program Area	Source of \$ to Cut	Cost-Efficiency Ratio—High Achievement Increase for Low Cost
<b>Instruction</b>		
Tools (textbooks, worksheets, Internet, reference books) (Ch. 2)	10	7
Organization and use of time (Ch. 3)	3	8
<b>Staffing</b> (Ch. 4)	8	6
<b>Professional Development</b> (Ch. 5)	1	9
<b>Bodybrain Partnership</b>		
Movement and aerobic exercise (Ch. 6)	0	10
Emotion (Ch. 7)	1	9
<b>Curriculum</b>		
Content for Link One (Ch. 8)	2	7
Content for Link Two (Ch. 9)	0	9
<b>Testing</b> (Ch. 10)	10	3

Figure 1A

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### *How to Read the Strategy-Builder Chart—Examples*

- A. There are three areas with high potential for budget cutting— instructional tools (for example, textbooks, workbooks, and copy machine plus paper and time to create worksheets), staffing (through attrition), and testing.
- B. The most cost-efficient areas in which to reinvest are movement and aerobic exercise, professional development, organization and use of time, and emotion.
- C. Although there is likely no money that can be cut from professional development, professional development has a high cost-efficiency ratio for reinvesting.
- D. There is likely little money that can be cut from organization and use of time, but a great deal can be done without reinvesting any money—change that will remain within current resources from year to year.

Some of these improvement areas, such as organization and use of time and initiating a movement program, are relatively inexpensive and can be fully implemented within weeks. Others, particularly developing curriculum to fit the Two-Step Learning process (see Chapters 8 and 9), will take much longer and require considerable inservice training over time; however, if they are to be implemented, first steps should begin as soon as possible. All actions must be prioritized carefully so they will fit within your diminishing resources.

Remember, there is no one best place to start nor one best path. Begin where it makes the most sense for your school, set a path through the issues that work for your stakeholders, and travel at a pace that will add sanity to an otherwise turbulent time.

*“Delay is the deadliest form of denial.”*

—Northcote Parkinson

See the game plan scenarios discussed on pages 1.9 through 1.11.

### **Action Item D: Remember—This is a time of national economic crisis and urgency for students**

Be honest and realistic without being alarmist. Continuing business as usual is a guaranteed recipe for disaster in your school. Free yourselves to be creative—think outside the box. Commit yourselves to the proposition that there are no sacred cows; everything and every penny must be open to scrutiny and analysis. This should include the portion of categorical monies that have been allocated for district office expenses, maintenance and repairs of buildings and grounds, and ongoing janitorial services as well as classroom expenses . . . everything.

This is also a time of urgency on behalf of students. We simply **MUST** find more effective, and cost-efficient, ways to improve learning for *all* students.

Invite a parent artist to draw a picture of a brain sitting outside a smaller box and another picture of a sacred cow with a prohibited sign (red circle with diagonal line, traffic sign style). Post these in the room every time your group meets; use them as humorous reminders to the group to think outside of the box and to never compromise for the sake of a sacred cow.

### **Action Item E: Shift the thinking**

Recognize that Einstein was right: “Today’s problems cannot be solved by the thinking that created them.” Before starting your discussions about what to cut, realize that you’re at the start of a steep learning curve. To make the best decisions, you need new information. And more important, everyone must be willing to let go of old assumptions, old paradigms, and old practices.

This is not a time to hold tight to what has been; this is a time to be *bold*, to be willing to turn adversity into opportunity. Acknowledge the fact that this will not be easy. Recognize that previous accomplishments may get pulled apart in the process. Come to grips with the reality that budget cutting cannot be avoided.

And what is this new information that is needed? It’s information that will help you remain dispassionate in your decision making, information that will help eliminate those unresolvable debates over differing philosophies of education—debates that have the same effect as filibustering in the U.S. Senate . . . impasse, death by ideology. The best idea should be the winner, not the person with the strongest social position.

What’s needed is information about research into how the human brain learns and how to use it as a template for dispassionate decision making. At the first (no later than the second) meeting of your group, assign each member a brain research section (found in Chapters 2–10) to read. Using the jigsaw collaborative process, have each member share his or her key points with the group.

### **Action Item F: Stay in the “here and now”**

Get into and *stay* in a “here and now” mode of thinking. This is critical on many levels. First, “the way it’s always been done” mode excludes newer staff and parents from being able to fully participate, making their time-limited observations seem less valid. If anything, in a budget-cutting process, history is an impediment. You must make your decisions based on what is before you right now. Yesteryear’s solution may have become today’s problem (or part of it) or less effective due to staff turnover and lack of training for newcomers. A fresh perspective from someone with no vested interests is invaluable.

Second, base your decisions on actual current effectiveness, not on theoretical impact or prior results. For example, in theory, lowering class size should increase student outcomes, but it does so *only if*

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- Instructional strategies and materials change to take advantage of the instructional opportunities available when teaching fewer students (the same instructional strategies and materials that aren't very effective with 30–35 students aren't effective with 20 students either)

*and*

- The adults in the room are well trained and proficient in how to use those tools and processes.

The same is true of efforts to reduce the student-adult ratio within a classroom.

“What could be or should be if” is a ruinous pitfall.

To help shift your perspective, visit other schools<sup>10</sup> that have moved in the directions you want to go.

### **Action Item G: Involve others**

Once your leadership team has its feet on the ground, begin to involve others, eventually including the entire staff and interested parents and community members. Have an “each one bring one” day at least once a month. Because everyone must live with the decisions to be made, it is essential that everyone understand why the decisions were made and respect the process that produced them. Even if someone doesn't agree with a decision, your school community can survive, and even thrive, *if*—and this is a very big *if*—there is respect for the process as well as for the principles chosen to guide the decision making.

Keep repeating these words: transparency and openness, transparency and openness . . . principles versus personalities, principles versus personalities.

### **Action Item H: Provide the necessary time**

Give the gift of time. Remember, frequent, short meetings are much more effective than a few long ones. Much has to happen between meetings. People need time to adapt to the need for change, to learn, to reflect, to grow, to become a team member assigned to a difficult task, to choose to take responsibility for difficult decisions, to change one's mind and go public about it, and to become a leader for cutting budget and improving program.

Start today. Set a schedule that shows commitment to this process and one that is backed by sufficient resources to ensure your success. Be sure your agenda for each meeting is clear and the process for moving group members from item to item has been well planned in advance.

### **Action Item I: Anticipate parent response**

Every parent knows his or her child has but one chance at kindergarten, one crack at fourth grade, and so forth. With that in mind, it is not unreasonable for parents to fear change at their child's school. How detrimental



to their child will the loss of the abandoned things be? Will the new approaches be implemented well enough to be successful in the first year?

Such fears are neither surprising nor unfounded. Most people prefer the known, even if dissatisfied with it, to the unknown. New doesn't necessarily mean better. A superb idea inadequately implemented will be no more beneficial than what it replaced.

*For each program area outlined in subsequent chapters, create a parent committee to advise you on parent concerns—a marketing research group to alert you to concerns and the kinds of information parents will need to understand the reason for the changes and how best to communicate that information to parents and community.*

Assign a staff member to meet with this parent group. Listen closely to what they have to say. Put yourself in their shoes; pretend you are the parent and it is your child who needs his or her best shot at grade-level \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).

Avoid educational jargon; make it understandable. Keep focused on what's best for students. Use parents' native language whenever possible to ensure that information is clearly explained and accurately understood, and that questions get answered.

## RESOURCES

Mapping out a strategy that is doable within the time available and the conditions within which you must begin your work is fundamental to your success. As you consider the Strategy-Builder Chart on page 1.5, consider several alternatives, and then pick the one that will give you the greatest success now and each year thereafter.

### Possible Game Plan Scenarios

As mentioned before, there is no one best way to tackle budget cutting and program improvement. However, the following will give you a starting point for developing a game plan that best fits your circumstances.

#### *Game Plan Scenario 1*

This book falls into your hands after January, making planning time very short. Consider limiting the scope of your work to these steps for the year:

**Step 1:** Start with Chapter 2: Instruction—Tools.

- Complete Action Items A through E and J through K. Allow replacement of consumables for key textbook adoption series only on a teacher-by-teacher basis. Invite teachers whose students always do well in the subject area to be creative.

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- Divide the money you've saved into categories:
  - Money needed to meet budget-cutting requirements
  - Money to be reinvested in movement and aerobic exercise and professional development
- Return to your analysis of tools in spring, summer, or early fall as time allows.

**Step 2:** Read Chapter 4: Staffing.

- Complete Action Items A through E. Analyze the positions that will come open due to attrition. Refill only those positions that are urgently needed for student safety or positions that are a keystone in a heavily funded program that must continue.
- Divide the money you've saved into categories:
  - Money needed to meet budget-cutting requirements
  - Money to be reinvested in movement and aerobic exercise and inservice
- Return to your analysis of staffing in late summer or early fall when openings are known for sure. Again, refill only those positions that are urgently needed for student safety or are keystone positions.
- Address Action Item F the day school begins in the fall.

**Step 3:** Read Chapter 6: The Inseparable Bodybrain Learning Partnership—Movement and Aerobic Exercise.

- Complete every Action Item in this chapter. Make this your only focus for program improvement for next year. Reinvest sufficiently in this area to fully implement your plan in one year. Include in your plan how new hires will be brought fully up to speed. The impact of a fully implemented movement and aerobic exercise program will produce impressive improvements in student achievement that will ease community fears regarding additional budget cuts and reinvestments. This will make future work much easier.

### ***Game Plan Scenario 2***

This book falls into your hands at the beginning of the school year, but the prior year's budget-cutting process left behind unhealed wounds and distrust of the process.

**Step 1:** Carry out Steps 1 through 3 described under Scenario 1.

- Pay particular attention to group process as you do so.
- Recommendation: Bring in a consultant to advise and assist you with relationship building, group building, and group process. If possible, recruit a parent or involved community member. Key criteria: an effective listener, one capable of putting his or her own agenda or point of view aside to be truly neutral.

*Step 2:* Read Chapter 10: Testing.

- Complete Action Items A through G.
- Obtain district, state, and/or federal waivers to cancel or reduce testing for next year.
- Be aware that completing the planning and implementation you'd like to accomplish in this area will take time, probably two to three years. Plan and implement accordingly.
- Divide the money you've saved into categories:
  - Money needed to meet budget-cutting requirements
  - Money to be reinvested

### *Game Plan Scenario 3*

This book falls into your hands at the beginning of the school year, and your staff and school community are prepared to address the challenge of budget cutting and are looking forward to the opportunity to improve the program for students in the process.

- Tackle this book in its entirety.
- Consider addressing the chapters in the following order:
  - Phase 1: Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 6 and the initial cutting of funds in Chapter 10 plus the necessary Professional Development
  - Phase 2: Chapters 3 and 7 plus the necessary Professional Development
  - Phase 3: Chapters 8 and 9 and the necessary Professional Development and completion of Chapter 10

## ENDNOTES

1. The power of emotions to hijack the cerebral cortex and disrupt analytical thinking is a well-researched area of brain research. For a brief tour of these phenomena, see *Exceeding Expectations: A User's Guide to Implementing Brain Research in the Classroom*, 4th ed., by Susan J. Kovalik and Karen D. Olsen (Federal Way, WA: The Center for Effective Learning, 2009).

2. These stages of community building come from the *HET* model. See *Exceeding Expectations*, vol. 2: 9.2–6.

3. The TRIBES training that accompanies this book is available through CenterSource Systems: 1-707-838-1061; fax, 1-707-838-1062.

4. Group training that accompanies this book is available through Chelsom Consultants. See [RealRestitution.com](http://RealRestitution.com).

5. Tuckman created a fifth stage, adjourning and transforming, to cover the end of a project and the breakup of the team. Unless marked by some kind of celebratory event to publicly encapsulate the successes and fond memories of the experience, the breakup can become a phase of mourning. Given the number of tasks to be performed during a time of budget cutting and a finite number of players, it is important to pay attention to this phase so that members enter the work of the next committee with a feeling of pride and accomplishment as well as

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confidence that the new committee experience will also end positively. See Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, no. 6 (1965): 384–399. See also [www.mph.ufl.edu/events/seminar/Tuckman1965DevelopmentalSequence.pdf](http://www.mph.ufl.edu/events/seminar/Tuckman1965DevelopmentalSequence.pdf). A good resource for Tuckman and other group building resources is [www.teambuilding.co.uk/](http://www.teambuilding.co.uk/).

6. Ken Blanchard and Margaret McBride, *The One-Minute Apology: A Powerful Way to Make Things Better* (New York: William Morrow, 2003). Blanchard's other one-minute books also have valuable tips for working within organizations as well as managing oneself.

7. What leadership teams should be established and who should be on them will vary depending on the political climate of one's school and district. Clearly, the wider and more inclusive and genuine the involvement, the greater the buy-in to the decisions made. District office and board members must also be involved as they must become allies in changing district policy and procedure. This is not a time for business as usual. All must be involved in rethinking what we do and how we do it.

8. This is *not* to suggest the goal of budget cutting should be to eliminate jobs but rather to assert that what each employee does should be best crafted to improve learning experiences for students. Also, if any vacancies occur, do not automatically refill them. Monies from such salaries can become the resources needed to meet your budget-cutting goals and to improve your program.

9. The ratings in the Strategy-Builder Chart in Figure 1A are based on the author's observation of program improvement efforts over the past 20 years that used the ITI (now referred to as *HET—Highly Effective Teaching*) model, a comprehensive model of curriculum and instruction based in brain research.

10. Susan Kovalik & Associates has been training schools in how to implement brain research in the classroom and schoolwide for 25 years. See their Web site at [www.thecenter4learning.com](http://www.thecenter4learning.com).

## ACTION SUMMARY CHECKLIST

- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item A: Gather a leadership team and set ground rules.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item B: Clarify the purpose.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item C: Have a game plan—Remember, simply cutting budget and suffering through with what’s left is a poor strategy. Use the Strategy-Builder Chart in Figure 1A. Choose or adapt a game plan scenario for your circumstances.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item D: Remember—This is a time of national economic crisis and urgency for students.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item E: Shift the thinking.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item F: Stay in the “here and now.”
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item G: Involve others.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item H: Provide the necessary time.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Action Item I: Anticipate parent response.