

Report of Findings from Community Budget Forums

March 16, 2010

During February and March 2010, the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and Parents for Public Schools (PPS) worked with SFUSD staff to convene three community forums about the district's funding crisis and proposed budget cuts.

The tri-lingual forums were held at Horace Mann Middle School (March 3), Thurgood Marshall High School (March 10), and Francisco Middle School (March 11), to try and make them more accessible to community members who don't usually attend school board meetings.

This report reflects our findings from discussions at these forums, as well as a workshop at the February 20th School Community Summit and a few comments sent directly to SFUSD staff or the PAC. Based on the Superintendent's proposed timeline to adopt a budget action plan, the PAC will present further recommendations to the Board on March 23.

How Forums Were Conducted and Who Participated

At each forum SFUSD staff presented information about the crisis in funding from the state, and described proposed budget cuts for our district. Parent leaders then facilitated small group discussions in English, Spanish and Cantonese, with guiding questions to encourage thoughtful conversations. They recorded participants' questions and concerns, as well as suggestions for other ways to address the budget crisis. Participants then returned to the whole group, where district staff provided answers to as many questions as they could.

Over 100 people participated in the forums, generally reflecting the ethnic diversity of families in the district. While this is not a large number, we found that many participants were SFUSD parents who don't typically attend school board meetings - but are deeply concerned about their children's education and the impact of the proposed cuts. [Please see the Appendix on page 6 for more demographic information about participants.]

What We Heard: An Overview

"What are these budget cuts saying for the future of our children?"

Participants included parents attending a district event for the first time, people who were new to budget issues, and others who are leading advocacy efforts to change state and district policy. Given these different levels of expertise, discussions covered a broad range of issues.

- The loudest message we heard is that parents, educators and community members are worried about the impact that proposed cuts will have on children.
- People are especially concerned the achievement gap will grow wider with these cuts, and asked how the district plans to serve students if schools will have fewer teachers, counselors, and support staff. They pointed to the loss of summer school this year, and want to know how the district will support students who are struggling the most.
- The overall questions remain, What are the Board’s priorities and goals in addressing the budget crisis? How will the proposed action plan support or jeopardize these goals? Without clear goals or detailed information about district staffing and program costs, it’s difficult to propose alternative budget scenarios. Many community members want access to more information, and to have more time to develop other solutions.
- Parents are concerned about teachers and other school staff losing pay - or losing their jobs. At the same time, they’re worried that schools with a higher proportion of newer teachers will lose out even more as those teachers are the first to be laid off.
- It was often hard for parents to understand how proposed cuts would impact their children’s schools - and the people who work there. In one group parents at first supported larger class size instead of missing days of school, but after some discussion concluded, *“Never mind, we didn’t realize that teachers would be fired if we increase class size. We all prefer to cut days of school instead of teachers.”*
- Parents have many questions about why California is at the bottom for education funding - and why our state has money for prisons but not schools. Parents asked how other states fund their schools, and what could be done to increase state funding here.

Questions from the Community

*“How can we figure out a way to understand how resources are being allocated?
The pie chart just doesn’t do it for me.”*

Throughout the forums people asked many clarifying questions about the district’s budget process, and how we receive funds from the state lottery, Prop. H, and the Prop. A parcel tax. They appreciated the opportunity to have many of their questions answered - and went on to identify many other questions, including:

- How do specific line items impact student learning – and fit into the priorities in the Balanced Scorecard? (Including Wellness Centers, school climate issues, etc.)
- How do the proposed cuts fit into an overall vision of making things work? How is this plan keeping us aligned with our district’s focus?

- Can we get a complete list of central administrative positions, unrestricted programs, salaries, and budgets?
- When I see a cut of \$19 million to the central budget, I don't get a sense of what is being cut - we don't see the rationale. "Keeping" is expensive, too. What are we keeping?
- Will the cuts affect the student nutrition programs? How can we provide better food for our children?
- How will cuts affect the Child Development Centers? Usually the CDCs are open even when the K-12 schools are not - would that continue with furlough days?
- Elementary schools seem more impacted by these proposals. How would increased class size affect middle schools and high schools?
- Won't cutting the central office mean there's fewer people to evaluate teachers... so won't that have an impact on the quality of what's happening in the classrooms?
- The proposal to exit schools from the STAR program - what exactly does that mean? Which schools would lose STAR program support, and what will they lose and keep?
- On suing the state... how much will that cost? What is the cost v. benefit analysis?
- Is there a forum for schools to share best practices, or for our district to learn from others about addressing the pain of these cuts?
- How do we keep the divide from growing between schools with family resources, and those without?

Concerns about the Cuts

"Will the district be looking at the community impact of decimating [a school's] staff?"

Parents and community members have many concerns about how proposed cuts would impact children, and how the district will be able to meet their needs. Specific concerns include:

- People wonder how teachers with large classes of young children will be able to address their different needs and abilities. What kind of support services and professional development will be offered to teachers and school sites if class size is increased?
- Latino and African American parents expressed concern their children will lose ground with furlough days, and wonder what schools will do to make up the lost learning time. They also worry about their children's safety if youth are in the streets instead of school.
- Parents wondered what families are supposed to do with their children on furlough days when the parents have to work, unless other programs can provide extended services.
- Many people asked what the district's plans are to minimize the impact of cuts, and wonder what the plans are to support teachers - especially given proposed cuts in professional development days and support from the central offices.

Other Ways to Address the Crisis

"It's hard to make suggestions when we don't know what's happening."

In small-group discussions we asked participants if they had ideas about other things the Board and district should consider in cutting the budget. While appreciating the opportunity to offer ideas, some people found the question frustrating, because detailed information about centrally-funded positions has not been made available. Many did offer suggestions, including:

- Can you furlough central office staff more days than school-site staff, so the district can save money without losing days of school?
- The highest-paid teachers and administrators should give back or give up more pay than lower-paid staff.
- Rent or lease district property.
- Advocate for the city to support some of the lost district resources (for example, nurses, and providing more academic summer programs).
- Cut transportation costs.
- Put caps on salaries and limit contracting with outside consultants.
- Explore ideas for raising money - not just at the school site level, but think creatively and call on the community for support. For example, get popular entertainers to commit funds and do benefits for public schools.
- With school breakfasts and lunches - how are the prices set? Could the district charge a little more - or have a sliding scale - to bring in more money from people who can pay?
- We need to develop systems at schools that don't already have a way to do parent and community fundraising, and support systems for schools to manage those funds (to ensure there's accountability about how the money is spent). Could parent groups provide technical assistance to help schools without these systems to set them up?

Informing Decisions about the Budget: Conclusions and Next Steps

*"I would like to know - is the decision made or is it now being considered?
Are we really able to influence this decision?"*

In addition to specific questions and concerns, many community members urged the district to slow down the process, and to make more detailed information available so that alternative solutions can be considered. These are some strong messages we heard from the community:

- We need to see budget information presented in the context of goals and priorities. The district's overall goals are referred to in one of the Powerpoint slides - but none of the information about cuts was related to back to these goals.

- Beyond understanding the budget line items, we need to see information about the programs and services we're keeping, and understand what this means for children and the classrooms.
- We need to see strategic plans for curriculum and staffing, and your specific ideas for how to support teachers and students despite these cuts. All the community is hearing about is the amount of money being cut - not how you're going to make adjustments because of the cuts. It's a lot less money - so what are we going to do differently?
- The district made a great effort to explain a very complex issue to parents and community members. We feel this was a good start, but there is more work to be done.
- People want to know what's going to happen next, including a process for people to deepen their understanding of the budget process, get their questions answered, and offer input into solutions. This process needs to include a clear timeline for making decisions, public meetings, and other ways community members can weigh in (for example, at budget committee meetings, on the website, or during office hours).
- People attending the forums did not hear information about real tradeoffs or choices. As we all learn more and begin to grapple with decisions, we feel alternative solutions will emerge, and we think the Board should consider these options publicly.

With these forums the district showed a commitment to informing families about the budget crisis and proposed budget cuts. Parents are beginning to understand why we are in a financial crisis and that we have no choice but to make cuts. But the process is still incomplete. People still have many questions, and more detailed information needs to be made available. Above all, families want to see a budget action plan that demonstrates the district's commitment to student achievement, equity, and community partnership.

Appendix: Who We Heard From

At each forum we had sign-in sheets and surveys to gather demographic information about participants, but not everyone filled out these forms. Altogether, about 100 people attended the forums, and we gathered 55 surveys (47% in English, 27% in Spanish, and 26% in Chinese).

While not a large number, we found that the results matched what we observed at the time: participants were generally lower-income parents of SFUSD students, and were people who don't typically attend school board meetings or district Town Hall events.

Based on the completed surveys:

- 73% of participants were parents (the rest were community members & educators)
- 5% have children of pre-school age, while 61% of their school-aged children are in grades K-5; 7% are in grades 6-8, and 30% are in grades 9-12
- 59% have family incomes under \$40,000; 24% from \$40-80,000, and 17% over \$80,000

Participants lived in **19 different zip codes** - and over half those who completed surveys live in **94124 or 94134**, each of which were 28% of the total (11 people in each).

Forum participants generally reflected the ethnic diversity of our communities, sometimes in the range of difference between the city and the school district. Participants accurately represented African American families in the district; over-represented Latino families; slightly over-represented white families in the district but not in the city; and represented Chinese and Asian families in the city, but not the district. "Other" ethnicities were not as well represented.

Ethnicity of participants:

