

NEWSLETTER

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REALLOCATING RESOURCES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Having the needed resources and using them effectively is a necessary condition for success in any reform effort. When it comes to allocating education resources, every district and school strives to allocate resources in a way that best helps them to achieve its stated goals. However, there is no single strategy or approach that will work for all. Rather, each district and each school must determine the right mix of resources—people, time, and dollars—to support its instructional approaches and meet the needs of its particular students.

The process of allocating and reallocating resources is an ongoing one, with changes made regularly in the ways resources are deployed to meet changing demands. In many cases, the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about reallocation is cutting a position or eliminating a program. However, a growing number of district and school leaders are adopting a more strategic approach to reallocating resources; one that more closely aligns annual plans and student performance goals with budgets.¹ The following strategies, all of which have been used in successful reform efforts, can facilitate the implementation, expansion, or sustainment of a wide range of school improvements.

Begin with an inventory of existing resources.

The school district budget provides a starting point for analysis to support reallocation of resources. The budget provides the big picture of how funding is allocated for key resource components—people, time, and money. One of the most helpful things to be learned from the budget is which resources have clear restrictions (e.g., funding for math coaches) and which resources can be used more flexibly (e.g., Safe and Drug Free Schools funding that can support a range of career and workforce development activities as well as character building activities). But school district budgets will only get you so far. District budgets tend to report figures in broad categories—such as salaries or supplies, or even more broadly at the department level items

¹ Systems Thinking in Practice: How a Superintendent and Two Districts Applied a Model of Systems Thinking for Increased Student Achievement. Webcast available at <http://www.centerforcsri.org/webcasts/webcast3/webcast3.html>

such as “special education” or “physical education.” This does not provide all of the details about how resources are being used. For example, decisions about the way support staff such as school social workers, psychologists, or reading specialists are deployed (to which schools, for how many hours, and to help which students) often do not get much attention in discussions about resource allocation, but those decisions affect the resources available to support reforms and they can make a difference in student performance (Roza, 2008). The way class time is scheduled (e.g., use of blocks, semester classes, and varying time for core and noncore classes) also can have a powerful effect on student outcomes, although it often is not reflected in budget allocations.

School district budgets set the larger frame for spending. However, for more detailed information on how resources are actually being used you will have to look to individual school budgets and practices. A careful review of building-level resources can help to identify potential funding sources that can support reforms or improvements. For example, many schools have taken advantage of the flexibility available in Title I funding to support a variety of reforms both inside and outside of the regular classroom. Building-level analyses also can help pinpoint resources that may be redeployed more effectively. Thus, taken together, district and individual school budgets provide an important baseline of information when looking for ways to reallocate resources to support school improvements.

REALLOCATION IN PRACTICE: *The school district of Syracuse, New York, has begun implementing a districtwide adoption of the Say Yes to Education (SYTE) model to increase the graduation and college entry rates of low-income students. Syracuse is receiving new funding from the state, city, and from the SYTE Foundation to assist with start-up costs; however, in time, as the initiative is expanded to more schools, the district will have to reallocate resources to expand and sustain the reform. In its first year, all of the funding from New York’s Contract for Excellence is being reallocated to the SYTE initiative to supplement start-up funds. As part of the planning process for the SYTE initiative, district officials have gone through the budget and created a list of potential funding sources that can be used to support the four main components of the SYTE model. Some of these include funding for afterschool, summer school, and tutoring programs that will become part of a holistic approach to supporting students in the SYTE schools. Each year, additional resources from those funding sources along with any*

new resources the district receives will be funneled toward this reform. Individual schools also will be working to reallocate their “local” resources including tutors and mentors from local universities to better support the SYTE model. By starting with a review of the district budget, and making sure that wherever possible, resources are focused on stated goals, the district is giving schools a jump start in reallocating resources to meet the demands of the SYTE model.

Look deeper into school budgets to understand resource allocation patterns.

A number of important resource allocation decisions take place not *between*, but *within*, individual budget accounts. These “micro-budgeting” decisions can have powerful effects—for example, deciding how teachers, resource specialists and other support staff will be utilized within and across schools. Roza (2008) posits that these micro-budgeting decisions often hamper a district’s school improvement efforts. She argues that school leaders can make better resource decisions by focusing more on these micro-budgeting questions. Education leaders seeking to understand and reallocate resources can review these below-the-budget allocations and evaluate if particular resources are aligned with stated goals.

Let’s take the case of a district-funded reading specialist and review options for allocation:

- Is or should the reading specialist be deployed to schools and students in response to requests by principals or teachers?
- Should the time of the reading specialist be spread equally across schools and students?
- Should the efforts of the reading specialist be targeted at those schools and students most in need?

The answers to these questions will depend on the broader goals set by district and school leaders. If the district’s principal objective is to improve the reading scores of those students who need help to pass a state exam, for example, then the specialist should be assigned to those schools and students most in need. On the other hand, if the district’s goal is to introduce a districtwide Great Books Program, one might want to allocate the time of the reading specialist equally across all schools. This same type of analysis can be used to evaluate allocations for a wide variety of resources that are deployed below the budgeting radar.

Seek flexibility to allocate resources in new ways.

At all levels of education—the district, building, and individual classroom—educators need flexibility and support to make the changes required to improve educational outcomes. Many schools and districts have been able to make changes in the way they use their three critical resources—people, time, and dollars—to provide more focus in core subject areas, to reduce class size, or to revamp professional development opportunities for staff simply by shifting resources around. Strategies to support these changes include shifting planning schedules, restructuring professional development activities, or changing how various support staff use their time. At the district level the superintendent and school board can set the tenor for innovation by welcoming discussions regarding resource reallocation and supporting the use of resources in new and creative ways. Principals, too, can encourage staff to find ways to better target resources toward priority areas. However, flexibility must be balanced with accountability; it is often easier to make the case for change when proposed innovations come with clear plans for measuring progress.

REALLOCATION IN PRACTICE: *In 2004, Barcroft Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, began a whole-school reform designed to improve student performance and better meet the specific needs of students—many of whom are low income and English language learners. With the backing of parents and teachers, an entrepreneurial principal was able to sell the district and school board on the idea of modifying the school calendar. By shifting the traditional calendar to a year-round schedule, school staff minimized summer learning loss for some students and limited burnout for the many students who attended summer school. The new schedule includes the same number of school days, with several breaks interspersed throughout the school year. During the breaks between sessions, students can choose from a menu of enrichment camps that infuse math and literacy into the lessons. All of this was done by reallocating existing resources. By combing the basic school funding, Title I money, summer school funding, and an exemplary projects grant from the district, Barcroft leaders were able to manage the new schedule with existing funds. While the program is still too new to determine results, the teachers—who helped design the program—believe that the new schedule is helping to improve learning.*

Three More Things To Consider

- **Think small as well as big.**
When thinking about resource allocations, school leaders often are drawn to big ticket items that involve large amounts of resources, such as reducing class size or hiring master teachers. But there are many other smaller decisions that can affect how resources are directed both to schools and within schools. When seeking more resources to support particular improvements, both district staff and principals can look to these less obvious resources.
- **Focus on aligning district and school priorities.**
Both districts and individual schools have an important stake in ensuring that stated priorities for educational improvements are reached. The more principals can align their reforms with district goals, the easier it will be for district leaders to support these efforts. On the other hand, district and school reforms that are not aligned can cause a great deal of friction between school staff and central office administrators, distracting from the focus on improvement.
- **Question the “business as usual approach.”**
Without a doubt, schools face many real restrictions when looking to reallocate resources to support improvements. It is also true, however, that some budget policies simply reflect long-standing practices that are rarely questioned or re-examined. When district or school leaders are seeking additional resources to meet goals, re-examining routine resource utilization patterns can help to identify areas where resources might be redeployed to better address current needs.

Reallocating resources should be an ongoing process. As reforms take hold and mature, new demands emerge and other resources may become available. Make resource allocation discussions an on-going part of staff meetings and regular planning sessions. Engage the entire staff in identifying improvements that can be implemented over time. Think about how any and all resources—people, time, and money—can be used to strengthen reforms.

References and Additional Resources

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