**Upper Darby School Budget Forum**

**Moderator Report**

**Group #2**

**Drexel Hill Middle School - 3.10.13**

**Moderator Germaine Ingram**

**Scribe Larissa**

This group of 36 (as high as 37) participants was about 2/3 women and 1/3 men, and overwhelmingly (from visual observation) white---only one participant appeared from visual observation to be a racial/ethnic minority (East Indian). At the start of the session we asked each participant to state his/her name and one or two words about the interests that brought them to the forum. More than 20 identified as a parent or grandparent; 3 were teachers; 1 was a township councilman; 1 high school student (came with her mother); 1 district administrator; 1 business owner; a district bus driver; and 9 who identified themselves as interested citizens. One person expressed his opposition to the school district as the primary factor that brought him to the forum. There was great age diversity---from the high school student to people appeared to be in their 70s+. This was a very animated and opinionated group; the liveliness and the size of the group made it difficult to maintain one-speaker-at-a-time, and made for a very dynamic hour once we got into plenary discussions.

After the introductions, we assigned segments of the group to consider different sections of the worksheet and be prepared to make recommendations to the entire group for actions that might qualify as low-hanging fruit or No Way/No How. Participants gathered in sub-groups of 6-8 to discuss actions 1-9, 10-19, 22-31, or 32-37 for about 10 minutes. The discussion in the sub-groups was lively, and the conversations appeared to include most members.

After returning to plenary discussion, the actions were considered in the following order:

#10—Eliminating noontime support for all elementary schools. Three-quarters of participants voted to treat this action as **NWNH** on grounds that students need a place to go at noon, and many can’t go home; the action would not be a true cost-saving because the district would need to increase hours for crossing guards; there isn’t enough time for students to go home and return to school; and it would create safety hazards for students.

#36—Charge/increase fees for school sports, community pool, summer recreation, and daycare. Three-quarters+ of the group voted to treat all four of these actions as **LHF.** Comments included: there should be a single activity fee for everyone; kids on free/reduced price lunch should not be exempted from fees; there are too few spots to satisfy the high demand for daycare----supply needs to be expanded and people should pay for it; the worksheet should have included more specific information about the average fee for childcare so that participants could calculate the dollar impact of a 7% increase in fees.

#1a---Reduce elementary school regular education by 10 teachers through attrition. Three-quarters or more of the group voted to make this action **LHF.** Comments: This would result in a tolerable increase in class size; they would want to see the impact of this action spread equitably across the district----there is already significant variation in class sizes from school to school; redistricting should be considered to address disparities in class sizes across district elementary schools; in the past, the district offered early retirement incentives to encourage higher-salaried teachers to retire ---this strategy could be used again.

#1c---Eliminate kindergarten. Despite a considerable amount of discussion, no consensus emerged on this action. There were not enough votes to make this action NWNH; nor were there enough votes to treat it as Shared Pain or a Gut-wrencher. Comments: Parents who can’t afford to pay for early childhood services can get state subsidy (there seemed to be some confusion between subsidized day care and kindergarten); the district needs to “think outside the box” in its delivery of kindergarten; kindergarten is necessary if the district is going to elevate test scores; the state and federal government should fund kindergarten; if kindergarten were to be eliminated, there are many parents who would not be able to pay for early childhood education; eliminating kindergarten would set kids further back; “It’s not required----so why provide it?”; “Why should taxpayers pay for kindergarten?”; Parents who send their children to private or parochial schools should perhaps get a tax rebate/discount; the tax structure needs to be reformed to create more reliance on sales tax and less on property taxes.

#28a & b---Reduce transportation services by 10%. Three-quarters of the group considered these actions **LHF.** Comments: private and charter school bussing represents most of the transportation load; there is a lot of inefficiency in the way the bus routes are organized----some of this is the fault of the parents; runs should be consolidated for greater efficiency.

#7---Reduce high school teaching staff by 10 teachers through attrition. Three-quarters of the group voted to make this action **LHF.** The caveat was that class size should not exceed 29 students. Dissenters to this vote commented that a class of 29 is hard to manage and large classes result in lower test scores.

#35---Increase property taxes. There was a lot of passionate commentary on this group of actions. We took votes on each of the 4 proposals. All four got enough votes to make them NWNH; but ultimately, **35a** (increase up to the index of 2.4%) got enough votes to be treated as **Shared Pain**. There were lots of comments about the related dilemmas of rising taxes pushing down property values, property values being hurt by declining education services, and maintaining education services being dependent, at least in part, on raising more tax revenue. One participant questioned why the school tax burden in neighboring districts is so much less than what he is paying in Upper Darby. The town councilman commented how hard it was for him and other council people to vote for a recent increase in taxes. One person said that there should be more effort to get rid of students who live outside the district, or make them pay tuition. Another person questioned whether raising taxes by 2.4% will make much difference in addressing the district’s financial distress.

#9---Reduce high school elective teaching staff by 20-40%. Three-quarters + of the group consider these actions **NWNH**. Concern over loss of music and arts programs fueled the motivation for the vote on these actions. Arts instruction is considered one of the “hang your hat” programs for the district. There was also concern that reducing special teaching staff would cut down planning time for standard curriculum teachers.

#3a, b---Reduce by 50% or eliminate all arts related arts instructors in elementary schools. Three-quarters + of the group voted to make this action **NWNH** for some of the same reasons expressed with respect to #9. Someone commented that arts instruction has already suffered cuts. (A vote to make 3a a gut-wrencher failed.)

#19b---Reduce Instructional and Curricular Support by 10%. Three-quarters + of the group considered this action LHF. They preferred to cut administrative support than cut more direct instructional services.

#16a---Reduce social workers from elementary and secondary schools. This action was proposed as Shared Pain, but failed to get sufficient votes. Some participants expressed the opinion that social workers are needed to provide as much adult support as possible for students. However, there were questions about whether guidance counselors can provide the needed support. Most concluded that guidance counselors can’t substitute for social workers.

Final count:

The group accumulated 53.8 points toward closing the budget gap. When the session ended, there was still lots of energy to consider other actions.

**GRANT TOTAL – 53.8 Points**