

**THE UPPER DARBY SCHOOL DISTRICT BUDGET:  
TIGHT TIMES, TOUGH CHOICES**

A REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY, THE SCHOOL BOARD  
AND THE ADMINISTRATION

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# Acknowledgements:

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# **THE UPPER DARBY SCHOOL DISTRICT BUDGET: TIGHT TIMES, TOUGH CHOICES**

## **Community Input into the District Budget**

### **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

The Penn Project for Civic Engagement conducted four community forums, *Tight Times, Tough Choices: Community Input into the District Budget*, between February 27, 2013 and March 11, 2013, with an overall estimated attendance of more than 484 community members, of which roughly 70 percent were female, as follows:

- February 27 — Watkins Senior Center; 53+ participants; 4 groups
- March 5— Beverly Hills Middle School; 114+ participants; 6 groups
- March 10 — Drexel Hill Middle School; 180+ participants; 5 groups
- March 11 — Westbrook Elementary School; 125+ participants; 4 groups

Each forum was designed to engage participants in a small group conversation in which they would work through a series of choices on how to close the city's estimated \$9.7 million budget gap. In the process we hoped to accomplish two goals:

- *Inform participants:* Inform the public about the 2014 budget – what is and is not included, where there is some flexibility, and what trade-offs are possible within that flexibility.
- *Inform the city:* Engage the public in a process that clarifies the public's priorities (not the priorities of individuals, but the priorities of residents when they come together to confront the trade-offs involved in balancing the budget).

To accomplish these goals each forum had the following structure:

- Harris Sokoloff, Director of the Penn Project for Civic Engagement, opened with an overview of the district budget and of the process for the forum.
- Small group work. Participants focused on a list of some 63 actions from across six service areas (instruction, support services instructional, support services non-instructional, community services, student activities, revenue actions) being considered by the district to close a roughly \$9.7 million budget gap; some were cost cuts; some were revenue raisers such as fees and taxes. The task in these small groups (10-20 or 30-40 people) was to work collaboratively to agree upon enough actions to pile up 100 points worth of impact. (Thus, each point represented roughly \$97,000 worth of impact.)

While in the small groups, participants worked to divide the possible budget closing actions into four “buckets:”

- *The Low-Hanging Fruit*: Actions that the group could agree on quickly. A 75 percent vote was needed to put something in this bucket.
- *The No Way, No Hows*: Actions that, figuratively speaking, made the group’s blood run cold. Stuff they wanted off the table, post-haste and permanently. Again, a 75 percent vote was needed to place something in that bucket. (Most groups found it much easier to fill this bucket than the others.)
- *The Shared Pain*: The actions people really didn’t want to approve, but realized they would have to consider if they wanted to make it to 100 points. This is where the evenings’ liveliest, most interesting discussions took place. An item could get put onto the Shared Pain list by a simple majority vote.
- *The Gut Wrenchers*: These were the really painful ideas that groups’ had rejected earlier, or avoided discussing all night, that ended up being considered in the last-minute quest to get a decent number of points on the board. Again, a simple majority ruled.
- A fifth bucket, *No Decisions*, developed by default. These were actions the groups either never got around to reviewing, or discussed with no clear conclusion. For some groups, that ended up being the biggest bucket of all.

Moderators told participants that accumulating points was less important than discussing and explaining their values.

All told, 19 different breakout groups, varying in size from a dozen to 37 did the work. They did it in widely varying ways. A few groups got nearly to 100 points, an amazing display of working through painful tradeoffs. The reports from each of the small breakout groups are available on the web at

<http://www.gse.upenn.edu/pcel/programs/ppce/projects> and <http://www.upperdarbysd.org/component/k2/item/7896-penn-project-for-civic-engagement>.

- Participants had an opportunity to give individual input by posting short individual comments posted on the “wailing wall.” More than 255 comments were posted on the Wailing Wall, all of which are posted on the web at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/pcel/programs/ppce/projects> and <http://www.upperdarbysd.org/component/k2/item/7896-penn-project-for-civic-engagement>.

The report that follows will focus on the citizen work during the 19 small deliberative breakout groups:

- February 27 — Watkins Senior Center, 4 groups
- March 5— Beverly Hills Middle School, 6 groups
- March 10 — Drexel Hill Middle School, 5 groups
- March 11 — Westbrook Elementary School, 4 groups

We present the citizen work in two ways: by themes and by the numbers. We'll start with a thematic discussion of the small group work – focusing on the themes that emerge across groups from all four forums. Then the “by the numbers” summary presents the data for each action area, in the order presented to the citizens in their worksheet. Together, the themes and the numbers represent broad guidance from those citizens to the school board as well as to the superintendent and his team. The report concludes with a discussion of next steps.

## **THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

- **Tension between property values, quality of schools, and what people can afford** – Participants across all four forums noted a tension between increasing taxes, property values and the quality of schools. Participants noted that property values are closely related to the quality of schools. They noted that increasing property taxes is necessary to maintain, and perhaps increase, the quality of schools. But they were well aware of the impact of such increases on different groups of residents in the district. Some people noted that younger people who want to move in, and can afford houses in the district, might not be able to afford the property taxes. Others noted that those on fixed incomes, or who are lower in socio-economic status, might not be able to afford to live in their houses. Taxes, they argued, are getting too high for many.

Sometimes swiftly, sometimes grudgingly, many breakout groups realized that it is necessary to increase taxes on themselves in order to balance the district budget, to support the services they had identified as essential.

- **Mistrust** – More than a few participants arrived with a mistrust and skepticism, some with more than a little. This mistrust centered around three broad areas: the worksheets, the workshop process, and how their input would be used.

Some participants mistrusted the choices, the numbers and the impact statements in the worksheets. Some were critical of the choices on the worksheets, wondering why some things (e.g., funding for Delaware County Community College) were omitted and why there weren't more choices,

wondering if the worksheets omitted things the administration didn't want to cut. Others questioned whether the numbers – the savings predicted of various cuts – were accurate. Still others criticized the impact statements as value-laden and biased, hoping to sway the process one way or another.

More than a few participants chafed at the process and at being asked to work within the choices provided. To a degree, this spoke to the difficulties in balancing the budget with increasingly limited resources. To a smaller degree, this is related to wishful thinking about magic bullets: “Get the Township to bear more of the costs” or “Get more money from the Commonwealth.” But it also spoke to lingering ill feelings from last year and feeling manipulated by the political powers that be. It also spoke to a desire to delve into other issues – including how much the Commonwealth supports public education, what some called an over-reliance on property taxes, the Township's lack of commercial properties, etc. – issues important to the district's long-term finances but not helpful to the immediate task of balancing the FY 14 budget.

This connects to mistrust of how participant input would be used. These participants were worried that the district would justify painful cuts by saying “we based this cut (these cuts) on citizen input.

A few participants never got past such mistrust, but moderators reported that most people were able to put the skepticism aside, at least temporarily, and get to the work at hand.

Over time, most participants warmed to the task and grappled with trade-offs and competing concerns – for maintaining support for students, for maintaining programs that engage students, for redesigning for efficiency and effectiveness, and for keeping property taxes low. And they began to realize “everything has two sides” and “we're damned if we do and damned if we don't.” In some cases, this led to greater empathy for the work facing the Board and district administration.

Still, some questions voiced early in forums lingered to the end: Will the Board really listen to what we have to say? How will we know?

- **Maintain broad support for students/children** – Most participants recognize that students need adult support in addition to what teachers can provide. They were concerned that reducing the numbers of adults who work with students (or increasing their loads) might have negative impact on student learning, social development and behavior. Across the board – whether it was talking about increases in class size, or cutting guidance counselors, lead teachers, or social workers, they were clear that children need more, not less, supervision, support, and guidance from adults.

- **Be Student-Centered – as little impact on student learning as possible –** Participants across all four forums noted that when considering cuts; focus first on that which has the least impact on children/students. This theme includes enhancing programs and services that contribute most to the District’s core mission: educating kids. There are actually two parts to this theme.
  - *On the one hand*, the direction is to cut first those programs, services or positions that do not have impact on students.
  - *On the other hand*, the goal in all cuts is to avoid negative impact on students – their quality of education, test scores, health and welfare.
  
- **Build on our strengths and cultivate student engagement–** Participants argued that Upper Darby is known for its strong kindergarten program, as well as for its “specials:” classes in the arts, drama and music as well as supporting after school activities. Maintaining and building on these areas of strength are essential to the health of the district in two ways: First, they engage a broad range of students, and serve as incentives for them to come and do well in school. Indeed, some student participants argued that these programs are the only reason they come to school every day. Second, they draw new residents to the district, helping to maintain property values and support for the schools.
  
- **Insure equity –** The drive for equity emerged in two complementary ways. First, participants were surprised to learn about class size and professional resources (teachers, lead teachers, etc.) differences across schools. There was a clear sense across the forums that class size averages should be as equal across schools as possible, that attaining class size equity across should be a goal. As part of this, they argued that the impacts of cuts should be spread equitably across the district, which might include addressing current inequities. And this includes making sure that there is consistency of program and teaching quality across all schools.

Second, there was a clear sense that it is important to make sure that those with the most need have sufficient resources to address those needs. Indeed, this might require more support at schools needing it the most, either because those schools have more students or because those students have more need.

Transportation is just one interesting application of this theme. Here, people argued that if the district changes bus service, it would be okay to reduce/eliminate transportation services for those closer to schools so long as it was maintained for those far away.

- **Redesign for efficiency, effectiveness and savings –** While participants were very willing to suggest cuts in non-instructional areas, that’s not necessarily because they thought there is a lot of “fat” there (though there

was some discussion of that in reference to nepotism). Rather, they thought that those areas were least likely to have negative impact on the district's core mission: educating and developing children. They did think there might be inefficiencies and ineffectiveness in the work being done as well as redundancies in the ways jobs are assigned. Thus, when they spoke about reducing staffing for non-instructional services (and even some positions such as lead teachers) they hoped that such reductions might lead to redesigning the work to increase efficiency, effectiveness.

For example, participants in several groups talked about the possibility that redesigning bussing routes could lead both to more effective bussing and lower bussing costs. Participants also believed that reducing some administrative staffing might enable district leadership to rethink who does what (and what really needs doing) so that work tasks could be combined and redistributed, again in ways that would increase efficiency and effectiveness while reducing costs. Finally, some hoped that the district might find ways to use technology to save money while improving both effectiveness and efficiency.

- **Work with others to reduce costs and improve services** – Participants in more than a few groups noted that the district has taken on tasks that should not be the responsibility of a school district – things such as summer recreation, social work and health care services. They thought the district should work with outside institutions – mostly the Township government, social work agencies and health care providers – so those institutions would take more fiscal and organizational responsibility. For example:
  - The township should take full responsibility for summer recreation programs.
  - County and state social work agencies should provide social work services and supports to those needing them.
  - County and state health care agencies should provide those services.And if it is not possible to shift the cost for those services to other agencies, then at least the district could reduce costs by sharing more and better coordinating with them to relieve pressure on the district budget.
- **Minimize impact to those adults with fewest resources** – Participants in the forums were concerned about two kinds of impacts to adults: those of cutting/reducing positions and those of increasing property taxes. In discussing administrative cuts and how to increase district revenue, their discussion focused on reducing the pain of those actions.

In terms of impacts of cuts on current staff, the idea was to avoid firing people whenever possible, using attrition and furloughs (in the sense of cutting back from 100% to 90% or lower).



“Those adults with fewer resources” include many senior citizens on fixed incomes (though not all) and lower SES taxpayers. While many groups saw property tax increases as “low hanging fruit,” even those groups noted that those increases might be problematic for these taxpayers. Their idea was to find some way to minimize the impact of tax increases on these groups of people.

- **Focus on the long term, not just this year** – Participants in many groups noted that we can’t keep increasing property taxes and the fund balance is already too low. Thus, they argued that the district, and the community, need to start taking actions for the longer term. Key among the ideas here was for the district, or someone or some organization in the district, to teach the community how to lobby in Harrisburg. And while the lobbying people discussed was to get the legislature and governor to provide more funding for public education in general, there was also some conversation about reducing unfunded mandates –either by removing the mandates or by providing funding for what the Commonwealth requires.

## **FINDINGS, BY THE NUMBERS:**

The following chart summarizes deliberative citizen discussion on the action areas from the worksheet. Here’s how it is organized:

- In the first column, you’ll see the action area, followed by the associated point totals.
- Second column: The number of groups that approved the item as Low Hanging Fruit. Some groups fiddled with the actions and point totals to reflect their values (this was encouraged). So in a lot of spots you’ll see a breakdown of citizen-adjusted point values: e.g. 6 groups @ 3 points, 2 groups @ 6 points.
- Third column: The number of groups that declared this action a No Way No How, and stuck to its guns all night. (Some groups put an action here initially, but came back to it later as Shared Pain or a Gut Wrencher.)
- Fourth column: The number of groups that approved an action under Shared Pain. Here is where most of the fiddling with point values and actions occurred.
- Fifth column: These are the Gut Wrenchers, the actions that no one really wanted to do and that may have been initially considered “No Way, No How” but which the group eventually agreed to. As you can see, not many groups wanted their guts to be wrenched.
- Sixth column: The number of groups that either never discussed the item, or talked about it without reaching a firm conclusion. Frequently, an item discussed but rejected as Low Hanging Fruit or No Way, No How

ended up staying in that limbo for the rest of the evening, without being revived.

This chart is followed by a chart that summarizes two patterns from the “By the Numbers” chart: The first pattern shows which bucket an action area most likely landed in when that action area was voted into a bucket. The second pattern shows where action areas were most often placed when there was a decision to place it into bucket. (Note: given the press of time and the challenge of the task, it was not uncommon for participants to discuss an item and not come to a decision about into which bucket it should be placed.)

### BY THE NUMBERS – A DATA SUMMARY

Service Area:	Action (current)	Points (@97000)	TIMES SELECTED				TIMES NOT SELECTED BY ANY GROUP
			LOW HANGING FRUIT	NO WAY NO HOW	SHARED PAIN	GUT WRENCHER	
1. Elementary Classroom Teachers	Reduce regular elementary school regular education by anticipated loss of 10 teachers through attrition.	9	8	2	1	1	7
	Reduce elementary school staff by 10% (roughly 26 regular education teachers).	23	0	5	1	0	13
1.a Kindergarten Teachers	Eliminate Kindergarten, a reduction of 27 teachers.	24	0	9	0	1	9
2. Elementary Lead Teachers	Eliminate lead teachers.	5	2	0	5	1	2
3. Elementary Specials Teachers	Reduce related arts instructors by 50%	17	0	3	0	0	15
	Eliminate all related arts instructors.	34	0	4	0	0	
4. Middle School Classroom Teachers	Reduce middle school teaching staff by 5 through attrition.	4	2	0	2	1	14
	Reduce middle school teaching staff by 20 teachers (average of 10 in each MS)	18	1	2	0	0	16
Middle School Lead Teachers	Eliminate lead teachers.	2	2	0	5	1	11
6. Middle School Specials Teachers	Eliminate instrumental music staff & program at the middle schools .	2	0	3	0	0	16
	Reduce technology/computer instruction staff from 8 to 4.	4	1	2	1	0	15
	Reduce foreign language from 6 to 2 teachers.	4	0	3	0	1	4
7. High School Classroom Teachers	Reduce high school teaching staff by 10 teachers through attrition.	9	4	0	0	1	14
8. High School Lead Teachers	Reduce lead teachers to 2.	2	2	1	3	1	11
9 High School Specials Teachers	Reduce high school elective teaching staff by 20% (from 45 to 36)	8	1	4	0	1	13
	Reduce high school elective teaching staff by 40%)	16	0	4	0	0	15
10. Noontime support (elementary schools)	Eliminate noontime support for all elementary schools	2	0	7	0	0	12
11. Building Support Elementary Schools	Reduce elementary building/office support from 24 to 20 (average of 2 per building).	1	2	0	0	0	17
	Reduce elementary building/office support from 24 to 16 (either 1 or 2 per building)	2	1	0	0	0	1
12. Computer Lab Assistants Elementary Schools	Reduce elementary school computer lab support from 11 to 5 (average 1/2 at each elementary school).	1	0	1	0	0	18
	Eliminate elementary school computer lab support	3	3	1	0	0	15

Service Area:	Action (current)	Points (@97000)	TIMES SELECTED				TIMES NOT SELECTED BY ANY GROUP
			LOW HANGING FRUIT	NO WAY NO HOW	SHARED PAIN	GUT WRENCHER	
14. Guidance	Reduce middle school guidance staff from 6 to 4 (2 at DHMS & 2 at BHMS).	2	0	1	0	0	18
	Reduce guidance staff at UDHS from 12 to 8 (2 at each center).	3	1	2	0	0	16
15.Attendance (Central Registration)	Eliminate 4 secretaries at Central Registration Attendance office while retaining 3 attendance officers.	1	2	0	0	0	17
16.Social Worker(s)	Reduce social workers from elementary & secondary schools from 16 to 8.	6	1	3	1	0	14
	Eliminate social workers from elementary & secondary schools.	11	1	2	0	0	16
17.Coordinator & secretary of Instructional Media	Eliminate both positions.	2	7	0	0	0	12
18.Library	Eliminate all three librarians & replace them with 5 building assistants to maintain libraries.	2	1	1	1	0	16
	Eliminate all three librarians & do not replace them.	3	0	1	0	0	18
19.Instruction & Curriculum	Cut 5%	1	2	0	1	0	16
	Cut 10%	2	7	0	2	0	10
22.Office of Superintendent	Reduce 5%	1	11	0	1	0	7
23. Office of the Principal	Reduce 5%	1	7	0	1	0	11
24. Nursing (public & non-public)	Reduce school nurses from 12.8 to 8 (to the state required minimum of 1 per 1,500 students)	4	1	3	0	0	15
25. Business/fiscal services	Reduce 5%	1	5	0	0	0	14
26. Maintenance	Reduce 2%	1	1	0	1	0	17
	Reduce 4%	3	2	0	0	0	17
28. Transportation (public/non-public)	Reduce 5%	3	10	0	1	0	8
	Reduce 10%	7	3	1	2	0	13
29. Information services	Merge information services with media services for a savings of \$135,000.	1	3	0	0	0	16
30. Recreation	Reduce administrative & support staff by 20%	0.7	1	0	0	0	18
	Reduce administrative & support staff by 40%	1.7	3	1	0	1	14
31.Crossing guards	Cut by 15%	0.9	0	2	0	0	17

Service Area:	Action (current)	Points (@97000)	TIMES SELECTED				TIMES NOT SELECTED BY ANY GROUP)
			LOW HANGING FRUIT	NO WAY NO HOW	SHARED PAIN	GUT WRENCHER	
<b>32.Middle School Sports</b>	Reduce middle school sports to 8 <sup>th</sup> grade only.	1	1	2	0	0	16
	Eliminate middle school sports	2	0	4	0	0	15
<b>33.High School Sports</b>	Eliminate male & female 9th grade sports & reduce the number of assistant coaches by 40%	1	1	6	0	0	12
	Turn all sports into club sports supported by boosters & volunteers	7	0	4	0	0	15
<b>34. Band &amp;, Choral, Theater &amp; extra pay/extra duty</b>	Reduce by 10%	1	1	4	1	0	13
	Reduce by 20%	2	0	4	0	0	15
	Reduce by 30%	3	0	6	0	0	13
<b>35, Property Taxes (NOTE: each 0.1% increase in property taxes raises \$89,000)</b>	Increase property tax up to the index of 2.4% (up 0.79 mills)	22	4	0	5	0	10
	Increase property tax up to the index plus partial approved exceptions of 4% (up 1.31 mills)	37	3	0	2	0	14
	Increase property tax up to the index plus partial approved exceptions of 6% (up 1.97 mills)	55	3	1	0	0	15
	Increase property tax up to the index plus maximum approved exceptions of 8.4% (up 2.76 mills)	73	0	3	0	0	16
<b>36.Fees</b>	Charge fee of \$100 for school sports (pay-to-play)	0.4	3	0	1	0	15
	Increase community pool fee by 25%	0.2	2	0	0	0	17
	Increase summer recreation by 100%	0.2	2	0	0	0	17
	Increase Daycare cost by 7%	1	1	0	0	0	1
<b>37 Fund Balance (This is the district savings account)</b>	Use \$1 million from fund balance	10	0	1	3	1	14
	Use \$1.5 million from fund balance	15	1	1	0	0	17
	Use \$2.0 million from fund balance	21	5	2	0	0	12
	Use \$2.5 million from fund balance	26	0	2	0	0	17
	Use \$3.0 million from fund balance	31	0	2	0	0	17

**PATTERN DESCRIPTION OF VOTING ON ACTION AREAS  
ACROSS ALL FOUR FORUMS**

**WHEN VOTED, IN WHICH BUCKET DID THE ITEM MOST OFTEN LAND**

**LOW HANGING FRUIT**

- Transportation (public/non-public)
- Office of Superintendent
- Property Taxes
- Instruction and Curriculum
- Elementary Classroom Teachers
- Fees
- Coordinator & Secretary of Instructional Media
- Office of the Principal
- Business/Fiscal services

**NO WAY, NO HOW**

- Band &, Choral, Theater & extra pay/extra duty
- High School Sports
- Kindergarten Teachers
- High School Specials Teachers
- Middle Schools Specials Teachers
- Fund Balance
- Elementary School Special Teachers
- Noontime Support
- Elementary Classroom Teachers
- Middle School Sports

**SHARED PAIN**

- Property Taxes
- Elementary Lead Teachers
- Middle School Lead Teachers
- High School Lead Teachers
- Instruction & Curriculum
- Transportation (public/non-public)
- Fund Balance
- Middle School Specials Teachers
- Elementary Classroom Teachers
- Middle School Classroom Teachers

***MOST OFTEN DECIDED  
(In declining frequency)***

- Property Taxes
- Elementary Classroom Teachers
- Fund Balance
- Transportation (public/non-public)
- Band, Choral, Theater & Extra pay/extra duty
- Office of Superintendent
- Instruction & Curriculum
- Middle School Specials Teachers
- High School Sports
- High School Specials Teachers
- Kindergarten Teachers

***LEAST OFTEN DECIDED  
(In increasing frequency)***

- Crossing guards
- Attendance (Central Registration)
- Building Support Elementary Schools
- Information services
- Guidance
- Nursing (public & non-public)
- Library
- Maintenance
- Computer Lab Assistants Elementary Schools
- High School Classroom Teachers
- Business/fiscal services

## **NEXT STEPS**

We encourage the School Board, the Superintendent and the administrative team to use citizen input as part of the way they make and explain their budget decisions. Tell citizens how the time and energy they put into coming to these forums was used: How did you use the public input in your decision-making. Which decisions were reshaped or even triggered by the public input. Why, in areas where your proposals diverge from the input, you made that choice.

Another important goal in this kind of community engagement, and one which was clearly addressed by this project, is increasing community understanding of education and education budgeting. For example, many in the community don't understand the state rules about bussing – that the district must bus special education students and students in charter schools. And many don't understand the variety of roles and responsibilities that school staff assume. This project helped address some of those kinds of misunderstanding, and more is clearly needed.

We also think there is a strong interest by the public for more engagement in several ways:

- Continue these kinds of discussion, where the public has an opportunity to talk with each other as part of the public input into the district budget going forward. Many of the participants in the forums, and the advisory group itself, noted that they would have been happy to work at these budget conversations for another 30-60 minutes, or more. And start it earlier in the process.
- Many of the participants indicated a desire to learn how to lobby legislators in Harrisburg, particularly their own, but also the entire legislature. They would like to know more about how to do that, and to be organized to do so. If this isn't a role the District can play, then perhaps connect them with an organization that can, perhaps the Education Policy Leadership Center or Education Voters – PA.

Finally, given that it is unlikely in the short term that the Governor and the legislature will restore previously cut funds for education, the administration might use these budget discussions to share its longer-term theory of action, or its strategies for insuring effective education in tight financial times.