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Do more with less in lean times, education experts say

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Suburban Washington school officials are searching for a miracle diet to shed some of the budgetary heft accumulated in nearly a decade of happy abundance.

Between 2002 and 2009, average per pupil expenditure -- the total operating budget divided by enrollment -- grew by nearly 45 percent in the region to more than \$14,000.

Budgets became bleaker last year, and only in Montgomery County did per-student spending increase slightly, according to Washington Area Boards of Education statistics.



(Examiner file)

Now, planning underway for 2011 is making 2010 look cheery, as superintendents face millions of dollars in new shortfalls even after last year's savings. Cherished programs are suddenly expendable, and pay raises are practically out of the question.

The Examiner turned to local experts for advice on getting through the current crunch, and coming away from it stronger and leaner.

Trim back on teachers

Take a lesson from D.C. schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee and fire unnecessary teachers, said Eric Osberg, vice president and treasurer at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. And base it on effectiveness, not tenure. "It's challenging, politically," Osberg said. "But from a budgetary point of view ... you save more money in the long run, and you do better by achievement, too." School systems have spent too much time "ensuring that everyone gets along," he added. "Organizations that live and die by the bottom line force themselves to get past that."

Cut central office administrators

Spend enough time with principals and they probably will tell you that central office "support" isn't always as critical to achievement as the central office seems to believe. "I'll be very honest," said Mike Durso, a former high school principal and current school board member in Montgomery County, "if it boils down to a staff person assigned to a school, or assigned in another capacity that might have impact, but not assigned to the school, I'm going to take the classroom teacher every time." It's not that there aren't great managers and mentors at the central office level, Durso said, "but we may be entering a period of time where some of that is a luxury."

Give school systems more money

Perhaps the problem is not that school systems waste money on administrator salaries and science labs suitable for top universities, but that they don't have enough for items such as universal pre-kindergarten and, well, more science labs suitable for top universities. "Kids don't have a pause button just because there's an economic crisis," said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. Weingarten added that she "absolutely" supports a continuation of federal stimulus dollars come 2011 to bolster state and local education budgets. Some of those funds, she said, could be used to keep schools open nights and weekends so that students could complete homework while parents take job-training classes.

Increase class sizes

Not long ago, suggesting an increase in class size was like suggesting a return of the dunce cap. But school officials are blanching no longer. "In the wake of a couple of decades of pretty aggressive movements toward smaller classes, there may be room to back out of that," said Raegen Miller of the Center for American Progress. "It's extraordinarily expensive." Miller cautioned that it should be done carefully: "For students in concentrated poverty, the smaller classes are more important," he said. But for most students, the promise of class-size reduction "does not stand up, in terms of student achievement."

Put every program to the test

"If you can't say that this program is meeting this student need in this way, and is proven effective by this evidence, then that may be something that's primed for the chopping block," said Daria Hall of the Education Trust. Top on Hall's list is "scattershot" professional development for teachers, which often requires hours of meetings that translate to zilch in the classroom, and require paying for a substitute teacher, too. "I'm not saying they're all bad, but so many are in place because three administrations ago the superintendent thought it was a great idea."

Rally the neighbors An economic collapse felt by the entire community should be fixed by the entire community, said Daniel Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators and former Fairfax County superintendent. "The schools working by themselves cannot make a difference," Domenech said. "They're going to have to cut programs, they're going to have to cut staff." Instead, businesses need to encourage employees to take time off of work to tutor students when extra teachers are scarce. County administrators need to fund community centers so that students have gyms to play in and computers to work on after the school day is over.


Ditch public schools altogether

States could save billions -- yes, billions -- said the libertarian Cato Institute's Adam Schaeffer, if they offered tax credits to families who pay private school tuition, and to companies that fund scholarships for low-income students. Instead of funding per-pupil amounts upwards of \$20,000 in some districts, a tuition tax credit would draw students out of the public system and into private schools, where tuition is often a fraction of public per-pupil spending. "We'd actually be spending less for more," Schaeffer said, citing a correlation between school choice and achievement gains. "It's not often that you get that in public policy."

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