

# Understanding School Budgets

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Typically, most music teachers—along with music merchants, concerned parents, and those who understand the importance of music education at an early age—are shocked when they learn that programs in music and the other arts are in jeopardy due to budget cutbacks. Well, they shouldn't be! Those who are surprised by budget reductions are either unaware of, or have not tracked the year-long process that school districts go through to build a budget.

Public hearings occur toward the end of the annual budget cycle because, before a budget can be official, it must be published and offered for citizen comment. The lateness of the public hearings in the cycle usually leaves only a short time to ask questions and propose changes.

As part of our responsibility as concerned citizens—as well as educators, business people, and parents—we need to monitor what is happening. By becoming involved early in the cycle, the budget will offer us what Holiday Inn's advertisement promises, "No surprises."

*Making Sense of School Budgets*, a publication of the US Department of Education, points out that developing the school budget is a process, a five-step process.

Step one in most school districts, is initiated by a top executive, usually the superintendent, or the chief business officer. Under that person's leadership, district employees assigned to budget development spend much of the year gathering data, selecting from available options, and making recommendations. Their final product is then submitted to the school board. They make amendments as deemed necessary, and then approve a final budget.

Two documents may be available during this early portion of the five-step budget process: First, the district may develop an "assumption statement" which will set forth key assumptions and formulas to be used in the development of the budget. Second, some schools publish a calendar of major steps in their budget process. If they don't actually publish a calendar, very likely the person in charge can provide information on the budget timetable.

It needs to be pointed out that during this early part of the budget process, individuals concerned with music education need to be in contact with members of the school board, as well as the executive in charge.

Needless to say, people monitoring the budget process should make it their business to get to know board members, and learn "how they stand on music and arts education." Also board members should be invited to attend concerts and other events during the year. They should be introduced at these events, and asked to make comments when appropriate. They shouldn't be strangers.

Step two in the budget process is when the proposed budget or summary of its major elements is presented to the school board. Usually, the board receives it only days, or perhaps a few weeks before it is officially released to the public. In some districts, policy may be that board members not discuss this initial briefing, but, in other places, board members are free to discuss the details, they're probably thinking about them and, if someone is close to one or more of the board members, they can usually find out what to expect.

Step three of the budget process—and before a budget can be officially adopted—it must be pub-

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◆ **Step One:** In most school districts, the budget is initiated by a top executive, usually the superintendent, or the chief business officer.

◆ **Step Two:** The budget process is when the proposed budget or summary of its major elements is presented to the school board.

◆ **Step Three:** Before a budget can be officially adopted, it must be published and made available for citizen review.

◆ **Step Four:** The budget process begins with the public hearings.

◆ **Step Five:** After the public hearings, the board adopts a budget with whatever amendments it deems necessary.

lished and made available for citizen review. Again it needs to be pointed out that this usually occurs relatively late in the budget process. And, typically, there are only a few weeks to read it, ask questions, and propose changes.

Step four begins with the public hearings. The school board usually holds one or more public hearings. At this time, it solicits citizen comments on the proposed budget. And, it should be pointed out, once it's gone this far, it's difficult to make changes.

The fifth and final step, is budget adoption and funding approval. After the public hearings, the board adopts a budget with whatever amendments it deems necessary. And, basically, "that's it"...at least for the current year.

Although we elect local officials to spend our school tax dollars, making sure they are "well spent" is ultimately the responsibility of each citizen. It seems clear that most communities

have failed to shoulder that responsibility when it comes to music education.

For example, here in California, shrinking budgets and Proposition 13 reduced the number of students playing in school orchestras by 50 percent in the years 1982-86. The public outcry was weak. Worse yet, input from the music community — music teachers, music merchants, and concerned parents and citizens — into the decisions that resulted in this shrinkage, was minimal.

It takes time and energy to master a local school budget. Before you begin, may I suggest that you acquire a copy of the resource booklet, *Making Sense of School Budgets*. Copies are available for \$1.75 from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402-9325. It will help you strategize and keep you from wasted efforts. Most importantly, it may help you turn a dead-end into a new beginning.

If you, along with others in your community, are not pleased with what is happening in school music in your area, remember that school systems have a tendency to follow Newton's First Law of Motion: They tend either to remain at rest or to continue in the direction they are already moving — unless they are acted on by some outside force. In our case, that "outside force" must be people who know and understand the importance of an education in music and the other arts, and who take responsibility to see to it that public education dollars are used wisely. For music educators, music retailers, concerned parents, and those who understand the importance of an education at early age, that's just good sense.

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