

**East Greenbush Central School District
January 9th World Café on Budgeting
Insights and Recommendations
January 16, 2012**

Background

The East Greenbush Central School District Board of Education would like to improve communication with the community regarding the school budget development and process. To gain insights from the community regarding their perspective and obtain ideas for improvement, the Board invited the public to attend a World Café session featuring questions that were developed by members of the Board of Education. The full list of responses is in a separate document and the original notes will be provided to the district leadership.

Event Details

The World Café session was held on January 9, 2012 from 7-9 PM at the Goff Middle School. The public had been invited to the event via a press announcement, signage, and school communications. Participants included 7 board members, 4 central administration, 7 administrators, 1 supervisor, 8 teachers, 1 teaching assistant, 2 transportation employees, 5 BRAC, 1 Town Liaison, 14 community members (marked as community, parent or voter on sign-in sheets) for a total of 50 participants.

Participants moved through a series of questions that were placed at each table. There were four 15 minute sessions. Participants answered two questions in each session and then moved to the next table. Table hosts shared insights from previous groups that had come through and encouraged participants to write on the table paper to capture all responses.

Overall Insights

Insight #1 –The budget process needs improvement

The budget process itself leaves people feeling alienated, unheard, and frustrated. Because the budget meetings do not allow for two-way dialogue, people do not see or feel that their ideas, input, or concerns are considered by the Board of Education. Time management with a buzzer, reading the budget to the audience, and the lack of overall

dialogue leaves many with the impression that this is a condescending approach that does not welcome public discourse.

Insight #2 – Communication needs to be a priority

Several people asked what had happened with the insights from the first World Café. Participants willingly shared their time, perspective, ideas and thoughts in this session without knowing if or how their ideas were going to be used. The school district has an opportunity to implement a communications plan that includes the input, insights and perspectives of the target audiences for on-going information sharing as well as continuing dialogue with the public. Because many of the participants were employees or volunteers within the district, an opportunity exists to strengthen internal communications to further engage the audiences and ensure consistency of messages.

Insight #3 – The community wants transparency and details

The budget presentation and the process for budgeting have alienated the public. People want information and details on mandates, administration costs/roles, line item costs and expense details. They are being asked to support and fund a school district without a sense of clarity regarding what they are funding and supporting. The district now has significant information from this session to use in increasing the understanding of the budget and operation of the school district.

Insight #4 – There are many more people in the community who can be engaged.

Many of the participants are employees or volunteers within the school district. In the discussions they identified other people who could be engaged including students, business owners, senior citizens, those people who are new to the area, people who may not have children, and other district employees. There were many ideas as to how to broaden volunteer engagement. Involving people in the district, sharing the great work being done, and promoting the students' accomplishments helps to build support and increase the potential for dialogue.

Recommendations:

- Ensure insights from the World Café sessions are utilized for the ultimate benefit of the students in the school district.
 - Share insights from the World Café sessions with the department heads, school leadership, PTO's, and any other appropriate groups to ensure that each stakeholder group identifies action items, deliverables, and timing as appropriate.
 - Appoint someone to consolidate the action items into a comprehensive action plan that can be monitored and shared with the public.
 - Ensure ongoing internal communication of the action plan so that employees of the district see the importance of their role and have ongoing opportunities to share ideas.
 - Develop communication tactics (press announcements, email, website notices, etc.) on a regular basis to inform the audiences of progress on the action plan as well as where they can get involved in the activities.
 - Use the insights from the first World Café to determine which tactics to use.

- Change the budgeting process to include dialogue and embrace a sense of respect, transparency, and accountability. While there may be elements of the budget process that will take time to improve, the community wants to see improvements to the current system.
 - Consider establishing a task force to develop a new process.
 - Publicize the work being done to establish a new process to further engage residents, employees, and volunteers within the school district.
 - Communicate the steps or components of the new process to all audiences in advance of any budget meetings.
 - Ensure audiences identified in first World Café are included in the communications efforts.
 - Evaluate the new process after the budget vote to determine areas for further improvement.

- Clearly present the budget, including the financial impact of mandates, line item expenses, and details to improve transparency.
 - Define the impact of budget cuts or mandates in ways that make sense to the average resident and are linked to the impact on students.

- Provide the budget details with plenty of time for people to understand and digest the content.
- Include visual elements to increase understanding, especially regarding the scope of mandates.
- Identify key comparisons with other school districts and learn from the experiences of other districts to improve.
- Engage volunteer members from the community to provide feedback on visual elements, organization of information, and details needed to ensure the budget is communicated as clearly as possible.
- Ensure budget ideas are considered in the development of the budget.
 - Share ideas with appropriate personnel for further exploration.
 - Ask employees and volunteers for their perspective on the budget, areas to be cut, and opportunities to save money or generate income.
 - Follow up with participants from the session to obtain additional perspective.
 - Communicate ideas under consideration for further refinement.
- Engage more of the community in discussions regarding the school district to broaden base of ideas and generate support for schools.
 - Outreach into the business community, senior citizen population, and residents of apartment complexes to gain additional perspectives, recruit volunteers, and increase awareness of the great things going on within the schools.
 - Consider doing market research using Survey Monkey to gain additional insights regarding the budget, process, awareness level, etc.