

# State of the Budget Town Hall Summary

Nov. 20, 2024

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The event was held from 6:30-9 p.m. at Cooper High School's auditorium

- Dr. Teri Staloch, Superintendent and Kristen Hoheisel, Chief Financial Officer
- 209 attendees
- 28 speakers

## Key Themes and Community Concerns

### 1. Accountability and Transparency

- **Demand for clarity:** Participants expressed frustration with the lack of clear communication about how the \$20M error occurred, where the funds went, and who was responsible.
- **Call for accountability:** There were repeated demands for someone to be held accountable for financial mismanagement to restore trust and confidence in leadership.
- **Transparency in decision-making:** Stakeholders emphasized the need for openness about plans for addressing the budget deficit and any cuts or changes moving forward.

### 2. School Closures and Facilities

- **Support for school closures:** Many suggested consolidating schools, such as merging high schools or converting underutilized buildings to other uses, as a way to reduce overhead and improve financial efficiency.
- **Community input:** Participants wanted thoughtful planning for closures, ensuring equity and engagement with affected families and staff.
- **Sell excess properties:** Suggestions included selling unused buildings like the ESC to generate funds while maintaining key facilities like the bus garage.

### 3. Declining Enrollment and Retention

- **Enrollment as a priority:** Attendees highlighted declining enrollment as a significant issue, urging the district to address why families are leaving and how to attract them back.
- **Magnets and specialized programs:** Programs like RSI, SEA and FAIR were praised for attracting families, with calls to expand successful offerings and replicate their models across the district.

- **Behavior and school culture:** Concerns were raised about behavior policies driving families away, with suggestions to enforce stricter discipline and create safer, more structured learning environments.

#### 4. Budget Prioritization and Staffing

- **Protect classroom staff:** Participants strongly advocated against cuts to teachers, counselors, and other student-facing roles, emphasizing their direct impact on students.
- **Reduce administrative costs:** Many called for cuts to central office staff and non-essential administrative roles before touching school-level personnel.
- **Efficient use of resources:** Suggestions included reviewing and eliminating redundant positions, optimizing bus contracts, and ensuring every dollar supports student learning.

#### 5. Equity and Inclusion

- **Support for underserved groups:** Attendees highlighted the need for bilingual and translation services to engage non-English-speaking families and ensure equity in communication and services.
- **Culturally relevant programming:** There was a call to support programs that uplift and retain students of color, ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities across the district.

#### 6. Community Engagement and Communication

- **Reaching the community:** Participants urged better outreach and engagement, including using broader platforms to communicate with families, staff, and community members.
- **Simplify messaging:** The district was encouraged to present financial and strategic plans in a way that is easy for everyone to understand, regardless of background or expertise.
- **Leveraging stakeholders:** Suggestions included forming advisory groups with diverse representation and involving families, staff, and community members in the redesign process.

#### 7. Strategic Reimagining

- **Innovative approaches:** Ideas included year-round school models, virtual learning days, flipped classrooms, and other creative solutions to improve efficiency and engagement.
- **Focus on strengths:** Stakeholders encouraged building on successful programs like magnets and engaging, hands-on middle school activities to better meet student needs.

- **Long-term vision:** Attendees urged leaders to prioritize transformational changes that rebuild trust, attract families, and create a sustainable, desirable district.

## 8. Emotional Connection and Commitment

- **Frustration and fatigue:** Many shared emotional accounts of feeling disheartened by repeated challenges and the district's reputation, yet still expressed hope for change.
- **Invested stakeholders:** Parents, staff, and community members voiced their commitment to the district and their desire to contribute to its success.
- **Desire for leadership stability:** Acknowledgment of past leadership turnover highlighted the need for consistent, long-term leadership to guide the district through these challenges.