

Guilderland Central School District



Comment Summary:

**Community Conversation II
January 17, 2012**

Prepared by the Office of Communications

Introduction

On Tuesday, January 17, more than 35 Guilderland Central School District community members came together to continue the conversation about how best to utilize available resources to meet the changing needs of our students and community in tough economic times.

"A Time for Transformation: A Continuum of Change" -- the second community conversation of the school year -- opened with a presentation by Assistant Superintendent for Business Neil Sanders summarizing the district's current economic outlook and clarifying several myths about the new Real Property Tax Levy Limit or "property tax cap." Based on rollover budget projections, the district is presently facing a \$3.3 million budget gap for the upcoming school year.

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Marie Wiles then presented on the need for the district to transform itself in order to address both the immediate challenges and long term goals of the district. Dr. Wiles shared several areas of possible change and innovation for the upcoming school year, including:

- Scheduling and the use of time;
- Technology;
- Leadership structures; and
- Data-driven budgeting.

During the second half of the evening, participants broke out into small groups to discuss several questions related to the areas of innovation listed above. For nearly an hour, they discussed whether or not the community could support changes in these areas and shared their questions and concerns about the potential changes. Participants also explored why the district has not regularly reached a 60% approval margin for its budget—the percentage of “yes” votes that would be needed to go above the tax levy limit going forward.

There seemed to be consensus throughout the groups that the community would be open to focusing on data-driven thinking, so long as the rationale behind each decision was clearly explained. It was also important to the community to know and understand where the data being used for decision-making purposes was coming from and how it was collected. A successful shift from traditional-thinking to data-driven thinking will depend in large part on the communication efforts of the district.

In regards to whether or not the community could support changes in the areas of use of time, technology and administration, the community appeared split depending on the costs/savings of each issue and how changes would directly impact students and staff. There was a lot of discussion about adjusting the high school schedule, and concern

about eliminating the advisory period. There did seem to be consensus that the community realizes the value of embracing technology, but there was also concern about how the district would support new technologies and not replace teachers with machines. There was also consensus that the community is ready to look at changes in the area of administration. Many felt that the district had too many mid-level managers, and others felt that the general public does not really understand what an administrator does on a day-to-day basis and that is why it is often difficult to support maintenance or growth in this area. In all groups there was a strong focus on the need to strike a balance with these tough decisions. In addition, there was also a strong focus on the need for the district to communicate its thinking to the community in a timely and clear manner.

There also seemed to be consensus that the district needs to do more to “get out the vote” during budget season and that the focus of the district should not be on why we cannot consistently reach a 60 percent approval rating but rather why such a small percentage of our community comes out to vote each year.

Following is a complete summary of the community’s responses to these questions, organized by question and table. Please note that the responses have not been edited, and appear in this report as noted on the night of the event.

Community Conversation II on the 2012-13 Budget Summary notes for Question #1

Instead of doing “less with less” during these fiscally challenging times, school districts can seize the moment to usher in school transformation by thinking outside of established cost and program structures to better align their use of people, time, and dollars with a vision for the future. However, change is never easy and will require confronting tradition and moving away from “emotional thinking” and towards “data-driven thinking.” Do you think that the community is ready for this shift? If not, what can the district do to better inform and prepare school community members for the pressing need to transform and use resources more effectively?

Table 1 Notes

- Participants said they believe residents could be open to “data-driven thinking,” but their concerns centered on where the data is coming from, who is collecting it and what gets used. “The decisions should be tied to the mission and vision statement,” said one mom.
- The key word was “transparency.” They don’t feel that the district has been as transparent as they’d like. They also felt that the district hasn’t listened to community input in the past (full-day kindergarten was cited as an example), so they wonder how this time will be different. The discussion also kept coming back to concerns about eliminating the advisory period.
- The group wanted more information about the data-gathering process. How are the answers going to be different this time than the status quo? Is the process tainted because it’s the same people gathering data as in the past?
- They would prefer an outside entity to gather data; they want an independent party to design the study and collect the data.
- “He who owns the definition wins the argument,” said one mom – the idea being that whoever designs the data collection process can manipulate it to come out the way they want.
- As an example, they cited the reference to 85% of students in advisory period use it for study hall. Their question: What do the other 15% do and what does the school do for those students? Are they using it for its intended purpose?
- One mom was concerned that relationships would be lost with the elimination of the advisory period. “We all know relationships are critical to student success,” she said.
- The general consensus is that decisions are being made now without research to support them.
- One parent commented that the same rigor should be used to conduct research related to eliminating advisory period/tutorial as is used to show that leadership in the district is effective.

- There was a sense that advisory period was perhaps not being used as intended because students were only allowed to pass between classrooms once every half hour.
- Students are frustrated by the limits put on them and are therefore not using the period as it's intended. "There are still kids who need it," said one mom.
- The group also noted that collecting data could prove to be "way more expensive to do" if an outside group is used. They suggested the district do a cost-benefit analysis.
- The group was bothered by the phrase "data-driven thinking," as they feel the district doesn't currently have enough data to drive its thinking. They were also bothered by the phrase "emotional thinking," which one dad found offensive. He said that calling it emotional thinking made it sound like it wasn't well-thought out or should be discounted because it was just emotional.
- "We all know the data doesn't exist now," said another dad. His feeling was that the process shouldn't be undertaken half-heartedly.
- They felt the district needs to start from the beginning to equitably examine everything, and to be open about what is off the table – what is not part of a data-driven budget? (i.e., what can't be touched?)
- Bottom line: we need to ask, what are the needs of the students? If all the research is full and fair and transparent, people will be open to changes in scheduling.

Table 2 Notes

- Important to remind community of vision when deciding what we can or can't provide.
- Why haven't we been doing this all along? We need to shift resources based on data.
- Data is important but it does not always tell the whole story. You also need input from teachers and parents.
- Math program for each unit is putting kids by level; helps support kids needs-clustering. This is a good example of changes that are positive for kids.
- We need more data on whether or not full day Kindergarten makes a difference for the amount it costs.
- Can we look at data from across the state for comparative data on Kindergarten?
- Data-driven is a good way to go but administrators need to communicate how they are going about it. A lot of people don't understand this or the tax levy impact. This can be done through social media, the website, and the newsletter.
- Data needs to be segregated so elementary schools that have greater needs get resources.
- Address imbalances in K-5.
- Are we looking at it year-to-year or over a five-year term (longterm)?

Table 3 Notes

- Data-driven budgeting makes sense; it is practical, smart and seems like a business-driven strategy.
- Everyone at the table supported looking at the budget from a data-driven perspective.
- Some had questions and concerns, most notably:
 - Exactly what data was being used to determine the value of staff/programs/etc.?
 - If enrollment figures are a good way to determine the value of extracurricular programs?
 - How many school years did that data cover, since need probably fluctuates?
 - Some services may not be quantifiable and may get lost in the data. Of special concern were programs focused on social and emotional development, the arts and academic support for average-performing students, especially in relation to teaching assistants.
- Lots of concern that the needs of struggling or low-average performing students without IEPs would get lost in looking at this approach: A statistic was given in the presentation that 85% of students use advisory to complete homework. One mother said her son was one of the 15% who used advisory to get the extra help he needed. She wasn't adamant about advisory, but was adamant about her concern that through the lens of data-driven budgeting, the needs of the 85% would be addressed while the needs of the 15% may lose out across the board.
- General concern that data-driven budgeting would benefit the majority and the quantifiable.
- All agreed that they would like to see a budget built in both directions—cutting from the top down and building from zero up—to see how they differ.
- All agreed that the best way to prepare the community for the shift is to help them understand what the big specter of “The Data” is, where it's drawn from and how it's being interpreted.

Table 4 Notes

- The group says it supports data-driven perspective in education as long as it's based on sound data. It's a refreshing approach.
- There are going to be pluses and minus to this and it's going to take a balance to accomplish it.
- The group felt today there is more data available because students are tracked better with the yearly benchmark assessments at each grade level.
- Group also suggested looking at data from a broader level, i.e., does there really need to be a 182-day school year? Does data show students are more successful with that many days? Can the year be shortened to save money? Need to get more creative in our thinking as an educational system.
- As far as community reaction goes, need to be ready for a backlash. Take it cautiously.
- Data-driven information has been used in Guilderland before to start new Foreign Language initiatives and that has worked. Data showed that that earlier students are introduced to foreign language, the better they do in school. That's how the FLES program was born.

- Overall, the group believes there is less money to go around so changes must be made.
- Data-driven budgeting may be the answer but just make sure the data is right and it is the best data available.
- Proceed with caution for the community to get on board with it. Only way to overcome resistance is to take it slow and to be sure the information is well communicated.

Table 5 Notes

- Explore revenues from other sources:
 - Corporate sponsorships (i.e., rename HS) & partnerships.
 - Ask for voluntary donations from residents.
 - Bequests, benefactors.
 - Look outside the revenue “box”.
- See if technology can be donated by companies.
- Create a “wish list” that people can choose to sponsor.
- Expenditure/efficiency studies are good; need to do the same on revenue side.
- Be cutting edge, forget the status quo.
- Community has to be ready for data-driven thinking.
- Hard to explain data-driven budgeting:
 - Need to be more personal with outreach, i.e. living room tour, meetings @ diner.
 - Can’t rely on paper and e-mail.
 - Personalize the issues with parents/kids.
 - More face time; can’t rely on people to come to meetings or click on links.
- Board should appoint ambassadors for face time in community.

Table 6 Notes

- No, community not ready (near consensus at table). A lot of sacred cows would need to be given up.
- Tight communities at elementary schools are attached to everything.
- Any change would need to be done at all schools.
- Change is hard.
- One member said: Thinks people would be swayed by data. Need to give them more credit and inform them of the reason behind the cut (give them the data).
- It matters how you phrase it – not “we will cut” but “we don’t need”.
- Will raise the question of why haven’t we done this before now?
- Sacred cows – only now beginning to look at them to find new ways to do things [pilot programs, breaking out of the box].
- Why not look at closing a school?
- Sports program is a sacred cow – our approach there isn’t data driven.
- Last year we spent time explaining and didn’t have uproar – the approach works.
- Most issues are at the elementary level, especially in terms of number of adults in building.

- Debunking myths—e.g., that every elementary needs a social worker regardless of need. Was it our own doing (emphasizing importance of SW)? Hard to convince parents when teachers fight for SW.
- People are not ready yet because we have never done it (data-driven budgeting) but superintendent is laying groundwork.
- If we follow data and make these changes, we need to make sure opportunities are really there—e.g., follow the rules about athletic practices not starting early (in conflict with clubs).
- 400 people will come to board meeting to talk about sports (regardless of data).
- We are on right track now, especially the recent evaluation of leadership structure.
- Repeated exposure to data-driven decisions will help.
- District may need to restore some things despite data; some “sugar” to help medicine go down?
- Data didn’t help language choices in past (German).
- Information must be presented in simple terms.

Community Conversation II on the 2012-13 Budget Summary notes for Question #2

Powerful transformation in tough fiscal times results from linking important priorities to restructuring available resources. Keeping in mind that the success of our students remains GCSD's primary mission in all economic climates, the district is looking at the following areas of change in the upcoming school year in order to foster continued student achievement:

- **Use of time and scheduling at all educational levels**
- **Technology investments**
- **Administration**

Do you feel that the community could support changes in these areas? What questions or concerns do you have about potential changes in these areas?

Table 1 Notes

- The discussion here overlapped with question 1, so many of the same comments were restated regarding scheduling changes and the elimination of advisory period.
- The concern is that students will lose relationships that are vital to learning. The advisory period enables students to bond with their teachers, so eliminating it will damage that.
- "Advisory increased the ability for students to access key teachers," said one parent. She said the board should look at research about the critical nature of relationships to academic success. She wondered if eliminating advisory period reduces students' ability to be successful.
- The group as a whole said they are open to change, but it depends on what the decisions are based on. "As long as you tell us why ... we want full disclosure," said one mom.
- "We're open to a different use of time as long as it's well-thought out," said another.
- One dad pointed out that the 85 percent (who are doing homework in advisory period) can't rule the day, but the 15 percent who are using advisory period as intended can't either. Both perspectives should be taken into account.
- Regarding technology: "I think we already missed the boat on technology," said one dad. He said the district should not throw money at technology just for the sake of increasing technology. "Be smart about investments," he said. The district should be proactively looking at options for increased technology.
- Another dad, who teaches some online courses, said the district should not look at distance learning as the solution to its budget woes. He said that it is not necessarily the best learning tool. "Don't hide behind distance learning to get rid of FTEs," he said.
- "Cloud is a buzz word," said another parent.
- (We did not have a lot of discussion on administration.)
- Bottom line: It's OK to change scheduling as long as there is transparency. And, the time for technology is now – but don't just add technology for technology's sake. Add what makes sense and what can be built upon.

Table 2 Notes

Use of Time

- My child is against it because he uses it for homework but I could support it if it is a better use of resources. Kids are resilient they will get over it.
- Impact on extracurricular and getting extra help would need to be assessed and explained.
- If it truly will reduce class sizes, students may not need extra period for help.
- My concern with 8 period days is getting away from middle school model; kids benefit by teaming and this would change the dynamics of learning.
- The extra time with kids during tutorial allows for more interdisciplinary work and projects, team meetings, getting to know kids.
- Loss of tutorial has a big impact on special education, accelerated, and AIS students.

Technology

- Can we do it? Yes. But one member had concerns on the student impact.
- Technology is awesome but, it can't replace human interaction.
- One member would rather see smaller classrooms.
- Technology improves how we teach using authentic documents. Students stay focused; pay attention.
- The community won't go for big ticket technology—we have what we need. Put money into keeping class sizes low.
- Invest in technology now.
- Don't need wireless or lap tops, computer labs are good enough with a couple of computers in classrooms.
- Tax payer doesn't want to pay for wireless so kids can bring it in to school (equity issues).
- If these are tools being used in college and workplace, doesn't it make sense to provide them with experience to it now. Open it up.
- Some college professors don't let students bring laptops to class because they are a distraction.
- Need balance: Many kids today are more adept at using the computer than working with pen and pencil.
- Cost is the big question.
- People vs. machines – are we going to lay off people to get machines?

Administration

- Lack of information about what administration does; community needs to be educated on what they do.
- Why aren't there more cuts to administration?
- I worry about safety with administrative cuts.
- Use data to prove need of administrators.
- I'm torn because they do a lot of work behind the scenes.
- How are they going to do APPR?

Table 3 Notes

Use of Time

- No one seemed concerned at all about restructured use of time at the elementary and middle School level, but the loss of Advisory at the high school was highly debated.
- Pros to ending advisory period:
 - Advisory pushes non-academic classes, such as PE, onto non-advisory days which is overwhelming the facilities. Gym classes are being taught in the hall.
 - Advisory creates schedule conflicts and inflexibility that limits the availability of courses to students, (one student wanted AP English and regents physics, but they were in conflict, forced to take only regents-level or struggle in physics.)
 - Many students don't use advisory well.
 - Seems like the most expensive way to do things.
- Cons to ending advisory:
 - Most students may not use advisory well, but for those who do, it can mean the difference between struggling and succeeding—"first time my son has ever pulled 90s in his life".
 - Will average students really take advantage of study labs?
 - Moving extra-help after school could conflict with extra curriculars, particularly if performing groups are already being rescheduled.
- Overall, people seemed to agree that if ending the advisory period would be a significant cost savings that it should be done, but that serious consideration and community feedback needed to be put in to figuring out how to best compensate for the loss of help and enrichment—particularly for average students.

Technology

- People were consistently conflicted about the technology questions; no one seemed to be committed either way, just struggling to express where to draw the line when it comes to the value of technology in education.
- People regularly emphasized that they don't want the district to become antiquated, and that comfort with technology is necessary in today's world but that if it came down to cutting staff to advance technology, it would be a mistake.
- They were also conflicted about the need to incorporate a lot of technology into education, as some consider kids already fluent in technology.
- However, teachers thought there were ways to teach and assign projects that implemented a smart, creative use of technology and social media.
- Wireless access—people recognized the value of flexibility and access to information, saw the education potential and, eventually, cost savings, but were very concerned about how to monitor responsible use of technology on a wireless system that encourages students to use their own hardware (something they already perceive as a challenge).
- Also concern that encouraging students to use their own personal electronic devices could create inequities in education, depending on what personal electronic devices each family could or could not afford.
- Distance learning was generally perceived as nice but not necessary. People wanted to know if there was any way distance learning could reduce costs and pay for itself?

- Cloud-based computing—similar input to the wireless access discussion, although parents hoped that in addition to being a potential cost-savings, that it could give parents and students better access to school work files from home as well as easier communication with teachers.

Administration

- There was general consensus that there were too many “mid-level” managers or academic administrators, but also general consensus that people don’t really know what people in those positions do and that better understanding their role would help people better understand their value—or lack thereof.

Table 4 Notes

Use of Time

- The group feels the model being used at the high school is the most expensive model so changes have to be made to save money.
 - The FTE remaining will be used more efficiently and they believe the community will support this.
- But they do believe that the district may get resistance from students and parents. The concern is for the student who is involved in many extracurricular activities and sports and who relies on that extra period to do homework because there is just no time to get it all done at night.
- Also concern for students in extracurricular clubs and music programs. If some programs are going to be moved to after school students may have to choose one program over another and that will limit their choices.

Technology

- The group believes that staying current on technology is vital to a proper education but have to look at most effective use of technology as to where to invest.
 - Use data-driven information for this.
 - Have to look at each grade level to see how it can be used most effectively.
- Group loved the idea of using Distance Learning at the high school level to teach special electives like Chinese and other courses because you would be sharing the cost with other districts and offering additional courses at the same time. It would be a win-win for everyone.

Administration

- The group believes there is an overwhelming feeling in the community that there are too many administrators running the district. Must be cutbacks.
- Group felt that many administrators are too involved in discipline and that the district needs to make better use of community resources/programs to deal with problem students and not rely on costly administrators to do it.
 - They can’t be the “cure-all” to all of society’s problems.

Table 5 Notes

- Hard to think about investments when you’re talking about cutting social workers, TA’s.
- But if we don’t invest now, we’re just delaying the inevitable.
- Have to think outside traditional ways of thinking.

- Worried about technology.
- It's about more than just instructional time; it's about the whole experience.
- We're already at a disadvantage to Europe.
- Use technology smartly to save money that you can spend on the social worker.
- Ask parents and businesses to donate used computers for use in elementary schools.
- There's a cultural issue--don't want hand-me-down's; don't want to go begging.
- Look at savings in health care.
- Fundamental answer on what community will accept goes back to how well things are communicated.
- Need more outreach.
- Get every teacher to get on parents at every meeting.
- Don't assume that non-participation equals agreement with proposals.

Table 6 Notes

Use of Time

- Will be a big fight.
- Parents and students more open to it (generally) but some are coalescing with staff.
- Families may like flexibility to help with course selection.
- Some will think it's a threat to music programs.
- What will savings be?
- If we remove advisory solely for cost savings, it won't fly.
- Providing more opportunities for learning is just as important a reason.
- Member in group is hearing from people that most kids won't take an extra class even if advisory is cut.
- Teachers say they'd rather have bigger classes than lose advisory because they say kids won't get the help they need and that they won't stay after school.
- Fear and rumors are starting; need information out there on how things would be implemented.
- Need data on its expense. Why was advisory put into the schedule (and budget) 12 years ago?
- Also need to explain it's not just the cost factor – adds flexibility to scheduling (so students have more choice).
- If 85% of students are doing homework during advisory, that's an expensive model for helping 15%! We have drifted far from intent. Need to change back. No evaluation of the program was ever done.

Technology

- Community needs to see more about how we are using technology.
- People who rely on technology in their profession get it. For others who have little exposure to technology, it's tough to make connection.
- Demonstrate to the community.
- Students adopt technology easily and are probably already ahead of us.
- Hardest challenge will be to create programs that take advantage of technology.
- Must teach kids and adults how to handle social networking if we open it up.
- Parents aren't getting it; don't see the future (new economy).

- Tech piece is a small part of the budget, yet such a focus.
- Salaries are a much bigger portion of budget. People will need to learn to accept trading technology for people.

Administration

- Yes, ready for change – public has been clamoring for it.
- But what about when they see the impacts?
- District has begun educating on cuts.
- People will question why we cut the positions we just added in last few years.
- Balance in layoffs.
- Don't understand mandates & burden on administration.
- Teachers and public wonder how come teachers are taking the brunt of the cuts.

Community Conversation II on the 2012-13 Budget Summary notes for Question #3

Earlier this evening, you learned about the new property tax levy cap which is currently estimated to limit the district's tax levy for the upcoming year to 2.54% unless a super-majority of district voters approved the budget. For the past three years, GCS D has not reached a 60% approval margin for its budget—the percentage of “yes” votes that would be needed to go above the tax levy limit going forward. Why do you think the district has not reached that voter approval threshold?

Table 1 Notes

- “No one is mobilizing the ‘yes’ vote,” said one participant. The group agreed with that sentiment.
- Other comments went back to the transparency issue and the fact that voters didn't feel their opinions were heard regarding full-day kindergarten.
- Bottom line: Mobilize the ‘yes’ vote and be transparent to generate more support for school budget.

Table 2 Notes

- Economy.
- Disconnect between people with no kids in school.
- Taxes.
- People don't realize what it means to vote no.
- How do we communicate with seniors, apartment dwellers?

Table 3 Notes

- Half the table thought communication only reached adamant naysayers.
- Half the table thought communication only reached adamant supporters.
- Everyone agreed that communication and trust in the district are the keys to getting higher approval margins.

Table 4 Notes

- The group believes the district has a very big credibility problem.
- The year the budget carried the lowest tax increase of 0.58%, the group says, the district had extra federal funds to use and it wanted to start a full day Kindergarten program with it. The Citizens Budget Advisory Committee recommended not doing that but the district did it anyway.

- That “jamming it down our throats” attitude created a rift with the community that year that has carried forward to this day.
- Other years before this, the group felt, there’s been some feelings in the community that teachers are well paid and get much better benefits than residents working in the provide sector and that has led to many “No” votes.
- Higher tax increase and years of near 5% increases has also has led to greater “No” votes.
- Finally, voter apathy from budget supporters who just don’t take the time to vote may have led to fewer “Yes” votes in some years.

Table 5 Notes

- All about outreach, education.
- People think budget will pass so they don’t vote.
- GCSD waits too long to get the word out.
- Current outreach/education efforts are too passive.
- I’d be curious to see what other districts do for outreach to get 60%.
- This will be a tough year to even get 50%, 60% would be a killer.

Table 6 Notes

- Guilderland is not a high-wealth district even though we’re perceived to be.
- Education for its own sake isn’t valued here as much as in other districts.
- Third of parents don’t vote.
- Vote goes up as student population goes down.
- Real problem is the turnout problem, not getting the numbers.

Community Conversation II on the 2012-13 Budget
Additional thoughts, questions and comments
(From various groups)

- We need to contact Apple to see about getting deals on used or refurbished computers.
- Quality of education after cuts is drastically different.
- My kids would have had more academic options if we'd stayed in Albany.
- No one wants to compromise on quality.
- District is looking at cuts every year and into the future--how do you not look at other revenue sources?
- Look at grant opportunities.
 - Add it on to an administrator's duties.
 - Make this an elective at the high school-get kids making phone calls, doing outreach.
- Give people in community access to district e-mail list and let parents use it for advocacy, parent-organized events.
- Why are we spending so much on transportation?
 - Some buses are half-empty
 - Look at rider patterns and reform transportation to make it more economical
 - Let more kids walk to school or bus stops or let parents walk kids to bus stops if they have safety concerns
- Would rather have enrichment than have door-to-door pick-up.
- Give people the option to waive transportation services.
- Put bus stops on main routes instead of in neighborhoods.