



A Case Study in Smarter School Spending

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An Elevator Speech for Traverse City Area Public Schools

Traverse City Area Public Schools' superintendent developed an "elevator speech" to help communicate the importance of Smarter School Spending. A good elevator speech is not only concise and well-rehearsed, it uses proven communication techniques to get the message across.

The "elevator speech" is a succinct, prepared talk that you can give on a moment's notice whenever you have an opportunity to share your idea with others. The elevator speech is so named because it was associated with the opportunity to tell someone about an idea during the length of an elevator ride.

An elevator speech is a good place to start with your communication about Smarter School Spending because it requires you to identify the most important elements of your idea and articulate them clearly. It also yields a highly usable end-product – an elevator speech can be used anywhere, at any time.

An elevator speech developed by Paul Soma, the Superintendent of Traverse City Area Public Schools, in Michigan, is below. Immediately following, you can see some of the specific communication strategies used to develop the speech.

Are we doing the most possible for our students with the budget dollars we have? I believe we can do more to increase student success with our available funds. Just as we have been modernizing our approach to classroom instruction in response to advances in curriculum and pedagogical technique, we must update our approach to budgeting and planning to take advantage of new methods of managing school districts. Before, the budget drove the curriculum – for example, funding decisions made years ago had a way of being frozen in place, thereby influencing how we teach our student years later. In the new approach, instructional priorities and the curriculum drives the budget. We will set our academic goals, prioritize the most promising instructional strategies for achieving those goals, and then design the budget to support those priorities. We will do this in cooperation with leading school districts from across the country who have joined together to form a group called the Alliance for Excellence in School Budgeting and travel together on the journey towards smarter school spending.

Let me give you an example. This is not a new journey for TCAPS. We've already had a successful start. Three of our schools, Courtade, Cherry Knoll, and Westwood, piloted three new math curriculums to find out which one had the most potential to help us improve our students' math learning. We rigorously evaluated the results achieved by each pilot through surveys and student, parent, and teacher feedback, as well as test scores. We found that these new curriculums have the potential to dramatically improve student achievement in TCAPS, potentially taking TCAPS from average performance in the state to above average.

However, each curriculum required a different level of investment. Hence, we learned that each of the curriculums merited further examination, so we expanded the pilot to other school sites with the intention of evaluating how well students do under each curriculum compared to the investment we'd need to make to fully implement each curriculum. Many people in the district have stated that the process of piloting and evaluating these curriculums has been among the most exciting and engaging work they've experienced at TCAPS. Shouldn't we infuse this same kind of excitement, engagement, and smart decision-making into the rest of the budget process?



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However, most important of all is the impact in the individual student. The principal of Westwoods Elementary School told me how the new curriculum has helped many kids, including a 3rd grader named Billy. Billy has always had trouble in math because our old curriculum relied on reading and Billy is not a good reader. Billy's frustrations were reflected in his behavior and often he had to be removed from the classroom. However, with the new curriculum Billy was able to engage directly with the numbers and found out he was good at math. His achievement was up - way up compared to the start of the year. In fact, by the end of the year Billy was making presentations to the whole class about math! It's students like Billy that make better instructional planning and better budgeting really exciting.

Critical Techniques Used in the TCAPS Elevator Speech

Open with a question.ⁱ Research has shown that questions do better than statements in persuading the listener. Questions invite the listener to think about an answer, even if they don't verbalize it. This act of thinking about the question leads to deeper processing of the idea. If the idea is solid, then deeper thinking about the idea increases its chance of acceptance.

Starts with "why" and then go from "why" to "how".ⁱⁱ The audience will usually find an idea more compelling if they are given the reason behind why the idea is important. If they are just told what the idea is, then they may lack the context to fully appreciate it. At TCAPS, the reason why is to modernize the planning to be more adaptable and better align resources with student achievement. This will lead to more excitement, engagement, and smart-decision making in the entire budget process.

Consider an Abridged Version of Your Speech

Though the elevator speech is a proven communication tool, you may be well served to develop shorter versions of it that can be used in an email or even over social networking tools like Twitter.

Beyond why the idea is important, the speaker should also address how the idea could be put into action. While the length of an elevator speech would not permit great detail, at least some discussion of how the idea could be implemented can help give the audience some confidence that it is feasible.

References external credentials. Soma mentions the Alliance for Excellence in School Budgeting as a third-party group that supports the work that he proposes TCAPS take action on. An idea will have more credibility if it is supported by an outside entity that the audience finds reliable.

Anchor and twist.ⁱⁱⁱ Audiences need to be oriented to your idea. To help do that you can anchor the idea in something the audience already knows about and likes. The idea is then framed as a way do more of what the audience already likes, but in a novel way. At TCAPS, the anchor was the pilot test of the math curriculum. The twist is the entire budget process could be like the math curriculum.

Tell a story.^{iv} An elevator speech can't be just a logical appeal. It must also have an emotional appeal. Telling a story about an individual student is a great way to personalize the idea. In Soma's speech, Billy struggles with math and overcomes his struggles.



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Acknowledgments



Paul Soma is the Superintendent of Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPS). Before taking the Superintendent position, Soma was the Chief Financial Officer for TCAPS. Soma is a recognized leader on working for equity in school funding in the state of Michigan. He co-authored *Transforming the Way We Do Business*, a book about continuous improvement in school districts.



Shayne Kavanagh (author) is the Senior Manager of Research for GFOA. He led the development of GFOA's Best Practices in School Budgeting. He has worked with school districts across the United States to put the GFOA Best Practices into action.

To learn how Smarter School Spending can benefit your students, email Matt Bubness at Mbubness@gfoa.org or visit the website at www.smarterschoolspending.org.

End Notes

ⁱ Importance of opening with a question, including supporting research, is more fully discussed in: Daniel Pink. *To Sell is Human: The Surprising Truth about Moving Others*. (The Penguin Group). 2012.

ⁱⁱ Concept is from: Simon Sinek. *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. Penguin Group. 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ In their document "6 Tips for Giving a Great Elevator Pitch", Chip and Dan Heath reference their article "Selling Your Innovation: Anchor and Twist" on the online version of *Fast Company*, fastcompany.com.

^{iv} Also from "6 Tips for Giving a Great Elevator Pitch" by Chip and Dan Heath. The story element is from their book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*.