No question about it. These are the toughest economic times we have seen in decades. School systems and their leaders are being hit from all sides.

Foreclosures in communities all across the social spectrum are depriving school districts of their anticipated funding. In San Bernardino County, Julian Weaver, then-superintendent of Victor Valley Union High School District, was stunned by a $2.5 million shortfall in expected district revenues this year due to severely declining enrollment caused by the foreclosure crisis. “Nobody saw this coming,” he said. “We were blindsided.”

Until recently, the high desert was one of the places where people were able to escape the spiraling cost of living by purchasing new tract homes at sub-prime rates. Many of those homes now stand empty or unfinished, as residents have been forced to walk away from their new homeowner status and take up residence in lower-cost rented apartments closer to where they work.

The housing boom fueled the need for new schools. Now, seats are going empty in many of these schools. Declining state revenues add to the misery, as state officials ponder the best ways to distribute shrinking resources. Delays in state budget approval processes make an already painful situation even worse.

In economically tough and turbulent times like these, how can school district leaders effectively plan for the best possible future?

Here are five keys to help you weather the storm during an economic downturn, as you plan your district-wide strategy to create a bright future for your constituents:

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By John Jay Bonstingl
1 **Build leadership at all levels as you focus on tangible results.** In lean times, family members sit around the kitchen table and do the hard math: What are our essential needs, and what are merely luxuries? If our current budget does not cover basic needs, how can we use our ingenuity to expand our income to meet those essential needs? What changes could we make to live better at lower cost?

Similarly, superintendents today are well advised to sit down with their leadership teams – certainly including their chief business official – and take a close look at each and every program. Are we getting the measurable results we need? How do we know? Are our precious dollars buying the improvement we need and expect? Are we leading for learning and high achievement for all, or is our leadership in the service of something else?

Effective leaders task their CBOs with the “how” imperative: Here is what needs to happen; tell me how we can make it happen with existing or possible funding streams. This is a very different approach from petitioning the CBO with the “what” question: Please tell me, what can we afford?

The wisest of leaders, in fact, are as familiar with their district’s bookkeeping as the CBO is. They work closely with their CBO, who is always involved in the strategic planning process and is fully engaged as a member of key district program development initiatives. When your CBO is a key player in the process of finding ways to “make it happen,” he or she will be an enthusiastic solution-finder. In the absence of such intimate involvement, your CBO may or may not see his or her role as an active proponent of your success.

District programs that are producing marginal results should be modified or even scrapped – and this includes programs that have been on the books for decades. Are all of your programs “value-added” – showing demonstrable, measurable, year-to-year gains for every student in every population segment in your schools? Are first-grade English learners still in EL when they reach fifth grade? If so, maybe you could benefit from a closer look at the EL program.

As you develop leadership capacity at all levels of your school district, make sure your focus is unwavering on your established mission, vision and values (MVV). Are they clear and succinct? Are they operational? All of your strategic planning and decision-making processes should be conducted through the filter of your MVV. If they square with your MVV, go forward. If not, you may benefit from stopping to reconsider your priorities and your options.

2 **Create new, mutually beneficial partnerships.** Why go it alone when the going gets tough? Businesses and other organizations in your community and region may welcome an invitation to join forces with you and your district. Companies and individuals can reap substantial public relations benefits and enjoy attractive tax breaks in return for financial and in-kind contributions to your school district and your district’s education foundation.

Combining forces with other neighboring school districts can also provide tangible benefits for all. “If your school district has its own special education program,” suggests quality school improvement specialist Ron Williams, “why not consider partnering with other nearby districts to create a joint special ed program? External funding sources may not cover all of your current special ed expenses, but a collaborative program could enable you and your partners to come close to break-even, and this can represent significant savings in challenging economic times.”

As school superintendents begin the process of strategic planning for their school districts, they search for the best ideas they can find. Many are attracted to the Baldrige model, a proven system for developing systemic, sustainable performance excellence. As a veteran Baldrige examiner and coach, I have seen school districts, businesses and health care organizations reap amazing benefits from engaging in the Baldrige Process. Our Baldrige-based Quality Strategic Planning Process™ has proven to be a world-class method for effective, long-term strategic planning for school districts and their community partners.

Quality-focused school districts partner with area hospitals and companies who are also dedicated to continuous improvement, to make the Quality Strategic Planning Process available for every organization in their partnership on a cost-sharing basis.

Oftentimes, companies searching for a tax break may be willing to pay the full freight for their local school district’s participation, as they engage in the Quality Strategic Planning Process alongside their local school superintendent. The resulting partnership may also provide the focus for a public relations campaign that benefits both the company and the school district.

Business leaders know that many of their employees will come from their community schools, and this provides another powerful incentive for visionary business leaders to invest in the success of their local school district. Consider setting up opportunities for key business leaders to meet with you, formally and informally on an ongoing basis, to explore possibilities for collaboration and mutual benefits.

3 **Make sure everyone knows that it is the community’s district strategic plan, not the superintendent’s district strategic plan.** When school superintendent Julian Weaver brought my organization in to work with him and his Victor Valley UHSD leadership team, using our Quality Strategic Planning Process, he made it clear from the start: The strategic plan that comes from this process must be understood by everyone in the community, including every student and employee of the school district, as their strategic plan, not the superintendent’s.

To this end, a community-wide strategic planning committee was convened, com-
praising school board members, classified and certificated staff, administrators, students, parents, business and faith leaders, and other leaders of key stakeholder groups.

This 60-person committee was fully engaged throughout every step of the process — validating the district’s mission, vision and values; creating focus topics and questions for the public opinion survey; analyzing survey results with the help of a veteran statistician; and creating from those results the district’s “7 Crucial Pathways to Success,” the community’s new consensus road map for its school district’s next five years.

The “7 Pathways” were synopsized and published in an attractive, easy-to-understand four-page brochure. Every household in the district received a copy.

Inclusion was the byword throughout the process. In fact, of the 10,000 surveys that went out to staff, students and parents, more than 8,000 were completed and returned, assuring that the authentic voice of the community was heard and incorporated into the district’s strategic plan. As Superintendent Weaver and his leadership team are well aware, wherever there is co-creation, there is optimal buy-in.

Now is the time to build on your strengths through out-of-the-box thinking! Extraordinary times call for extraordinary solutions. Tough times often spur people’s best creative juices. See what your team can come up with as it addresses some of your district’s most intractable problems.

Instead of reducing course options to accommodate existing resources, think instead about possible ways to expand course options. Would your community welcome a K-16 initiative, including the possibility of dual-enrollment courses? High school students in such programs around the country get both high school and college credits for taking certain college-level classes, enabling some students to graduate high school with a full year of freshman college course credits already under their belt.

Would any of your elementary teachers appreciate a few free minutes during the school day? When the custodian at an elementary school was empowered to think outside the box, he offered to monitor the students on the playground one day a week — for the teacher whose classroom was the cleanest the previous week. A win-win for everybody! When all of your people’s best creative talents are tapped, wonderful solutions are possible.

Consider outside expertise to facilitate your strategic planning process. Everybody has a full plate already, and now they are asked to become experts in strategic planning and development? Professional facilitators can be useful in getting things done that your own team doesn’t have the time or expertise to do.

The experienced facilitator’s work with you and your team can guarantee a minimum of pushback as you design your district’s near-term future with key members of your staff and community.

Also, an outside facilitator can say things that need to be said, especially when it might not be possible for the superintendent and his or her leadership team to do so. This provides you with needed cover, as you bring together even the most recalcitrant elements of your community into a force for good, working together for every young person’s ultimate success in school and in life.

Jay Bonstingl is a national quality strategic planning consultant and speaker, and a veteran national and state Baldrige examiner. He is author of the bestselling book “Schools of Quality” (Corwin Press, third ed.) and serves as executive consultant for AASA’s Center for System Leadership. Contact him at Bonstingl Leadership Development.
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