

Are You Making Budget Presentations in an Empty Room? Engage Your Community Online via Budget Webinars

BY JENNIFER A. BLAKE

Have you planned a community budget meeting lately? Perhaps you spent weeks advertising the evening event, composed a great presentation and maybe even ordered light refreshments. Then the night comes and only two or three people attend. An experience like that can be frustrating and is a waste of district resources. Does that mean a district need not communicate about its budget planning? Absolutely not! Instead, the district may need to consider alternatives to the traditional evening meeting. In the Great Valley School District, administrators have seen an increased response to online communications; specifically, its budget "Lunch and Learn" webinars.

Like all school districts in Pennsylvania, Great Valley School District has needed to make some serious budget considerations over the past several years. While focused on preserving its strong educational programs, the district cut more than \$14 million from its operating budget since 2009. Along the way, the district remained committed to communicating its considerations and decisions with its stakeholders. Moreover, budget presentations have grown over the years to include information about Act 1, the impact of PSERS and the increased cost of benefits.

"All of these factors contribute heavily to the budget decisions we need to make every year," said Superintendent Alan Lonoconus. "It is important for our community to understand that the district doesn't unnecessarily raise its budget every year, but rather that we need to balance the factors we can control with those we can't. The impact of things like PSERS and the cost of health benefits is significant."

When attendance at budget meetings started to dwindle, the Great Valley School District decided that instead of asking its community to come in for a two-hour meeting, the district would have to reach its community in a new way. In addition to beefing up the budget information on its web site and videotaping and broadcasting finance meetings on its web site and local cable access channel, the district began an effort in 2012 to make webinars available to the community.

Through the collaboration of the Chester County Intermediate Unit, the district began a series called "Lunch and Learn." Offered as a half-hour session, budget information is provided live via an internet connection to anyone who logs in to watch. Viewers may participate in real time by submitting their questions in the webinar's chat function. Those questions are answered live by the superintendent at the end of the webinar.

"Community members can grab their lunch and log in from wherever is convenient for them," said Communications Director Jennifer Blake. "We are able to provide pertinent information in a shorter time period and participants need not alter their day to join us."

Blake said that each webinar has had about 40 participants, on average. That is a substantial increase from the number of participants the traditional evening meetings would draw. In addition, the webinars are videotaped and offered online for those who could not watch the live event.

"The decisions we make related to budget are important," said Lonoconus. "We are continually looking for new ways to offer information and engage our community. With so many professional organizations now offering their training online, this seemed like a logical way for us to go. We've been pleased with the results."

Ms. Blake is the Director of Communications and Outreach at Great Valley School District and is a member of the PASBO Communications Committee.