10 Tips for Budgeting

When you start budgeting for next year, count to ten. Here are ten key factors for successful budgeting.

1. Make a budget.

This sounds obvious, but too often dollars get spent on random requests. Having a budget shows administrators that you plan ahead. It lets the teachers know that money gets allocated for specific topics and/or needs. Connecting the budget to curriculum provides a basic understanding that collection development comes from considering student and staff needs, not just using the latest sale flyers. Define costs of books, CDs, and equipment. Think about the formats that best suit your school. Plan the percentage to spend on student needs as well as staff requests. As you build the budget, consider the number of students or schools, curriculum topics, circulation statistics, and funding sources. This provides a prime opportunity to explain some of your choices, such as why library binding makes a better choice than buying whatever lays on the discount store’s sale table. Be prepared to explain your budget to administrators, teachers, and parents.

2. Put on your own oxygen mask first.

When flying, the flight attendant always says, “In case of an emergency, put on your oxygen mask first and then help others around you.” Follow this good advice when planning your budget, too. Include line items for your professional needs. In the budget, be sure to include school library magazines and books that help keep you attuned to new materials and equipment as well as give you current information about the profession. If the school district allows it, include professional memberships and conference fees that allow you to network with other library media specialists.

3. Look for grant dollars.

Many school districts receive grants from state and national governments. Look for ones that target library media centers, such as Improving Literacy Through School Libraries, [http://www.ed.gov/programs/lsl/index.html]. However, other grant money can be utilized in the library. If you have grant writers in your district, contact them to get information about where current dollars go. Then start to build a case for why some of the money should go to support library media center programs. For example, Title II money can be spent in a variety of ways and one option involves library materials. Monitor http://www.grants.gov/ and http://www.ed.gov/fund/landing.html. Look at the Web site for your state’s department of education and see what funds they make available to schools. Consider professional development grant dollars and how they might allow time for technology or information literacy training. Private entities also offer grants. Check out local foundations and look to make connections from their funding to your school’s needs.

4. Specify current curriculum needs.

While administrators expect to update computers on a regular basis, they don’t always make that same commitment to print material. Help them see the importance of keeping a current print collection, too. For example, when new textbooks are adopted for content areas, be sure to contact the publishers to get a bibliography of books included in the text. A parent volunteer can check that list against what the automation system shows your district owns. See where there are holes in the collection and then share that information with administrators. Show them how the library media center can support the purchase of thousands of dollars of textbooks with trade books. Purchase teacher editions of textbooks for you to use when you collaborate with teachers. It helps you to better understand their requests when you see what they see. Be sure to monitor departments’ curricula on an annual basis since changes sometimes get made between book adoptions. Also, be aware of copyright dates on materials that will give students incorrect information. Showing those dated materials to department chairs can help build a chorus of voices asking for additional library funds.

5. Make friends with the PTO/A.

Get involved with your local parent teacher organization. Go to the events so they see you as an active part of the faculty. Include them in volunteer opportunities for the library media center. Ask for the library media center to be a line item in the PTO/A budget. That money could be used in several different ways. Author and/or illustrator visits can seldom be paid for with school funds, but PTO/A dollars can bring in meaningful speakers for students. The visits support language arts standards and help youngsters of all ages appreciate the writing process. PTO/A money can also provide additional materials that wouldn’t be affordable from the school budget. The materials could be trade books, but also consider the possibility of buying blank books for young author and illustrator experiences.

6. Cooperate with others.

As you plan your budget, think about other libraries that might have similar needs. For example, talk to the public librarians in your community who may already be paying for database subscriptions that you consider useful. Encourage your students to use the public library and spend your money on other items. If you have a local college or university in the area, they may have special collections that your students can use. Community hospitals and businesses have specific items that could be useful to vocational students. Check with the local newspaper to see if a Newspaper in Education program can provide newspapers for your students. Today’s
Use circulation figures to justify requests.

Today’s automation systems provide a plethora of reports. Let that data help show that you need more money. Find the circulation figures for your most used materials. More than likely the actual items will look “well used.” Show the circulation figures and the items to an administrator and/or department chair. Project the usage for the next year. On the other end of the circulation spectrum, take a look at items that don’t circulate. Do they sit on the shelf because they are physically unappealing? Would the same material in a new cover draw users? If so, share that information with others. “A picture is worth a thousand words” moment for them could increase your ability to buy. Plan part of your budget to update older items.

Make a long-range plan.

Technology plans often require a three-year plan. We need to think of our budgets in the long term, too. Be aware of anticipated curriculum changes and book adoptions. Expect to purchase more materials for those subject areas in the years the changes take place. Consider equipment life expectancy. When does it become more expensive to repair than just replace? If you intend to discontinue an older format, give teachers time to find replacements in the updated format. Plan your purchasing so items arrive when you will be in the building and can accept the orders. Create a calendar that allows you to spend the budget in a timely manner. If you let the money sit too long, it appears you don’t need it. If you spend it all quickly, you don’t have funds at the end of the budget cycle for that “must have” item.

Be financially creative.

Sometimes you just need to look at finances in a different light. If you want additional items, but can’t seem to find the money for them, let programming provide them. Start a birthday book club. Let parents pay for a book for the library, create a bookplate for the front of the book, add the student’s name to that bookplate, and let the good times roll. Check with your staff to see if they would like to be honored with a book in the library. Let parents purchase a book in honor of a favorite teacher. Start a book review column for your local newspaper. You get thousands of dollars of review books and the column makes a great public relations vehicle for the library media center.

Try to spend others’ money.

Ask students and staff to tell you what they couldn’t find in your library media center. Keep a list of “wants and needs” that you can pull out at a moment’s notice. When the end of the financial year rolls around, invariably someone has money left. If your administrators know that you have a great list that will provide wonderful new material for students, they are likely to let you spend the money.

You may never have the size budget that you think would be perfect, but you can impact the budgeting process for your library media center. For one, choose your words carefully when you talk about the facility and budget. Wording can open doors and accounts. Ask for money to impact student achievement, rather than for “my library.” The squeaky wheel may get the grease, so make your needs known. However, whiners just irritate those around them. Squeak with a smile. Check with the principal, business office, or media director to find out local expectations and state laws. You don’t want to ask for something that isn’t legal in your state. After that, just use the creative streak that makes library media specialists such special people and plan a budget that benefits your students and staff.

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