

# Budgeting Time to Teach about the School Budget

Dale Weiss

**A**s a teacher in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) for the past 16 years, I have grown used to dismal budget cut news arriving each February. Although cuts are always frustrating and their results burdensome, our school has been able to “hang on” reasonably well. This year, however, the budget cuts were extreme. Our school’s budget was down more than \$150,000 and we were also slated to lose SAGE funding (class size reduction funding for grades K–5). Besides markedly increased class sizes in the coming school year, we would be losing our art teacher, library media specialist, math teacher leader, six classroom teachers, and an educational assistant.

I took a deep breath and readied myself to share the bad news with my third-grade students. It is never easy to have this kind of conversation, and this year’s budget discussion, I knew, would be especially difficult. I began by briefly explaining how a district-wide budget works. I likened it to the budget a family might have, comparing each person in the family’s needs to each MPS school and its needs. I emphasized that sometimes there is not enough money to take care of every need that deserves to be taken care of. Many students shared something about their own family and the need for money:

I used to take ballet lessons, and I know I still deserve to have ballet lessons. But my family doesn’t have enough money now, so I can’t have my ballet lessons.

Sometimes I get my clothes at Goodwill because my mom says they are cheaper since the clothes aren’t new.

We don’t have a car, but my dad says if he can work more hours at his job, maybe we could have enough money for a car.

One way our school would be different next year, I explained, is that we would have more students in each classroom.

But how will we learn if there are so many students in our classes?

How will our teachers be able to help us?

If I raise my hand, I hope the teacher will see it because it sounds like there will be a lot more hands in my class next year.

I also told the students that because of the cuts, next year our school would not have a librarian.

What! How are we going to check out books?

But how am I going to have books in English and Spanish to read at home?

What’s going to happen to all those books in the library?

The students literally gasped when I said that Ms. Sue, our art teacher, who has taught my students art since kindergarten, and who has been at our school for 10 years, would not be back next year due to the budget cuts.

Who will help us learn about paint and clay and making bird feeders so the birds can have food in winter?

I just felt like crying. So many things will be gone next year. I understood their feelings; after all, I had many of the same feelings myself. At times I found myself fighting back tears. This was a raw moment for all of us. (Sidebar A)

## What Can We Do?

I believe strongly in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire: “Read your own reality to write your own history.”<sup>1</sup> I want to give my students the tools to critically examine and understand the world around them, to feel passionate and empowered to change injustice when they see it, and, in doing so, to become shapers of their future. So I carefully explained that not only our school—but also all schools within MPS—would experience budget cuts next year. (Sidebar B) I then zeroed in on the cuts at our school. “Remember how I have told you that when you think something is unfair, there is always something you can do to try to turn the unfair situation into a fair one?” Many chimed in that they remembered being told this. “Let’s think about what we can do to try to turn this situation around.” I drew a T-chart on the board. I told them to think about two things: the effects of the budget cuts on our school, and what they deserve in their education. As students had an idea, they wrote it on a Post-it note and affixed it to the appropriate

Effects of the Budget Cuts on Our School	What We Want and Deserve for Our Education
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No art teacher</li> <li>2. No library teacher</li> <li>3. No math teacher leader</li> <li>4. Classes with too many students in them</li> <li>5. More kids at lunchtime so it will be too noisy</li> <li>6. More kids together at recess so it could be more dangerous</li> <li>7. Not enough supplies for our school</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Art once a week</li> <li>2. Library once a week</li> <li>3. Gym once a week</li> <li>4. Music once a week</li> <li>5. Smaller classes like we have now</li> <li>6. Only two grades in the lunch room at a time</li> <li>7. Only two grades on the playground at a time</li> <li>8. All the supplies we need to be able to learn</li> <li>9. Special teachers for art, library, music and gym</li> </ol>

column. We then grouped our comments into categories:

Now that they had a clearer idea of the negative effects the budget cuts would have on our school, juxtaposed with the kind of education they wanted and deserved, I asked the students to think of ways we could try to make this unfair situation a fairer one: “What can we do as a class to make a difference?” I divided the students into four groups and asked each group to decide on one person to take notes and another person to report back to the whole class. “OK, you have five minutes for your discussion.”

After each group reported back their ideas for action, we narrowed the list down and voted on a favorite idea. The students decided to write letters about how the budget cuts would affect our school. “But who should we write to?” they asked. I explained the roles of the superintendent and the school board, suggesting that since the superintendent was the one who made the budget, perhaps we should address our letters to him. Then Victor piped in: “But you said the boss of the superintendent is the school board. Shouldn’t we write to the superintendent’s boss?” I told Victor that his idea made more sense than mine. “I want you to each write your own letter to the school board. Think about your own thoughts, questions, and feelings about the budget cuts. Whatever you think, whatever your questions might be, and whatever your feelings are—all of this is important! Look at our T-chart for help.”

The students then spread out to different spots within our classroom and in the adjacent hallway to write. After everyone had a letter written, they read their draft to a writing partner, who commented and gave suggestions for improvement. The drafts were edited and then proofread for grammar and punctuation. I gave students the choice of typing their own letter or having me type it for them. We compiled the typed letters in a book. They were excited to see the final product:

Wow, we really believe in a lot of important things!  
 I sure hope the school board will listen to us.  
 I hope the school board will let Ms. Sue stay!

We planned to deliver our book to the school board at a meeting scheduled for later that week. However, the meeting was postponed due to a snowstorm. By the time the meeting

was rescheduled, the news had gotten much worse. The governor had proposed a state budget that would eliminate an additional \$74 million from MPS. Our school community had planned to ask the school board to reallocate funds (for example, to continue funding small class size instead of buying new math textbooks), but now the battle had clearly expanded far out of the hands of the local school board.

Before the meeting, my students handed out “I ♥ my public school” buttons to the more than 200 people in attendance. As the meeting began, several parents fervently shared their views on the budget cuts to our school. As is often my experience in conversations about education, what was lacking was the voice of the students themselves. I signaled to the moderator for the microphone, and I introduced my students by saying how important it is to hear from those who will be most directly affected by these cuts, our students. A definite hush came over the room as Dakota and Michael read their letters and then presented the book of letters to the school board.

*Dear MPS School Board,  
 Every child deserves to have a music teacher, a math teacher leader, an art teacher, a gym teacher, and a librarian. I think every single child deserves a good education, and education isn't complete without music, extra math, art, gym, and library. Besides, children need to express themselves with music, math, art, gym, and library. Why? Well, you went to school and you got the right education. That's exactly what we deserve too. If you got it, we should get it too!*

—From, Michael, age 9

*Dear MPS School Board,  
 MPS needs a lot of money. I heard that next year it's possible that there could be a lot of kids in all of the classrooms. I hope the teachers won't get all stressed out and then get headaches and take their stress out on the kids. That would make me cry. If you have a kid, you do not want your kid coming home to you crying, do you? If we have big classes then a lot of kids won't get enough attention and then they might not learn some things. If you have a kid, when your kid comes home and you ask, "What did you learn today?" you don't want them*

# To Discuss, or Not to Discuss, School Budget Cuts with Your Students

Andrea S. Libresco and Jeannette Balantic

It may seem self-serving to discuss school budget cuts with your third-graders. After all, your own salary may well be on the line, and it would be unethical to turn your students into a personal army of lobbyists. But it would be myopic to believe that school budget issues affect only teachers and, therefore, the subject should be avoided. In fact, in Dale Weiss' class, students clearly had their own concerns, as they worried about over-crowding in classes and the lunchroom and the loss of specials. It would be wrong to ignore these legitimate concerns of students and deny them the opportunity to take action on issues that affect their daily lives.

In your own particular class, students can examine the list of items on the budget chopping block, as well as the costs to taxpayers of each item. They will then be qualified to make informed arguments about what the school budget ought to include, the costs of including the items, and the costs of not doing so. Students may elect to take action on whatever side of the issue they come down on.

It is often the case in today's political arena that different sides talk past each other. Lessons on the school budget should nurture students who understand all sides of an issue and are able to have thoughtful discussions with those who disagree with them. Well-informed students are then welcomed and ought to be encouraged to speak out and act on any issue of importance to their lives; school budgets ought not to be excluded.

Jessie Jacobs/commons.wikimedia.org



College students in a protest march in "jazz funeral" form, protesting State budget cuts in 2010 for University of New Orleans and other higher education.

*saying "Nothing," do you? I have a cousin coming to this school next year. One day I asked her, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" She said, "An artist." But I don't think it will be possible for my cousin to become an artist because my school won't have art anymore. Please help us.*

—Sincerely, Dakota, age 8

## Sometimes Things Stay Unfair for a Long Time

Several weeks later, right as the bell was about to ring at the end of the school day, I casually mentioned to my students that I wanted to learn more about doing art with children since Ms. Sue would not be with us next year. The students clearly were taken off guard:

But I thought if we wrote letters to the school board there would be more money for MPS and we could keep Ms. Sue.

Michael and Dakota read their letters at that meeting, and they asked for more money for our school. I really thought we would get more money. But now I don't think it happened.

Looking at the disappointment on their faces, I realized I had unintentionally led my students to conclude that if we believed something to be unfair and took action, the unfair situation would turn into a fair one. I remembered saying over and over: "There is always something you can do to try to turn the unfair situation into a fair one." Yet my students heard something quite different. In their hope and optimism as 8- and 9-year-old children, they knew that their actions would bring about a miracle. My heart sank; I felt I had let my students down.

"I realize that I did not explain this to you clearly. And for that I am very sorry. What I should have said is that even when we take action to try to change an unfair thing, things don't always change. Sometimes things will stay unfair for a very long time. But what is important is that we keep trying to do something whenever we see something that is not fair." The bell rang and I continued, "We will continue talking about this on Monday."

Monday was April 4 and I wanted to talk with my students about the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. With this in mind, I spent time during the weekend rethinking the approach I had taken with my students about the process of change.

First thing Monday morning, I asked everyone to meet on the rug. "I thought so much about your comments at the end of the school day on Friday. I realized that I did not explain something very important: Trying to change unfair things often takes a very long time. April 4 is the anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr., who died 43 years ago today. I would like to read you the book *Martin's Big Words*.<sup>2</sup> I want you to think about how he and others worked to change unfair things."

The children were fascinated with the book. I paused after each page so we could discuss the drawings and King's poignant and passionate words: And Dr. King said, "When the history books are written, someone will say there lived



black people who had the courage to stand up for their rights.” I asked: “What do you think Dr. King meant by those words?” The students thought for a moment and then responded:

Martin Luther King and the other people he marched with were very proud that they were trying to change unfair things.

People will remember them for a very long time because they helped get rid of bad laws. It’s kind of like when people went to Madison and were standing up for their rights.

Then I asked: “Do you see a connection between what Dr. King and others did, and something you have done?”

Yes! It’s like when we wrote those letters to the school board.

And made buttons.

And I went to march in Madison with my family.

“Exactly. Now keep listening to the story and to Martin’s big words. And this time, think about if the unfair things they marched for changed quickly or took awhile.” I continued reading the book. On the last page it said that the protests continued for 10 years (from the Montgomery bus boycott) until lawmakers voted to end segregation.

Oh, I get it now. It took a really long time for things to get better.

Ten years! If it took that long to get money for MPS we would be 18 or 19 years old. I don’t think we would even be in MPS anymore!

I asked the students why they thought change sometimes takes a very long time to happen. Maybe some people don’t want the bad laws to change. “And why do you think that might be so?”

Because even if a law did change, some people might not want the law to change so they might not act in fair ways anyway.

“You are so right. Even if a law changes, people’s minds don’t always quickly change. That can take a very long time.”

Teaching my students about budget cuts was an education for me. I learned that laying a social justice foundation for young students is a complex process and one that needs revisiting. I also learned that my students are not afraid to speak up about deserving a good education and that they expect to be heard. 🗣️

#### Notes

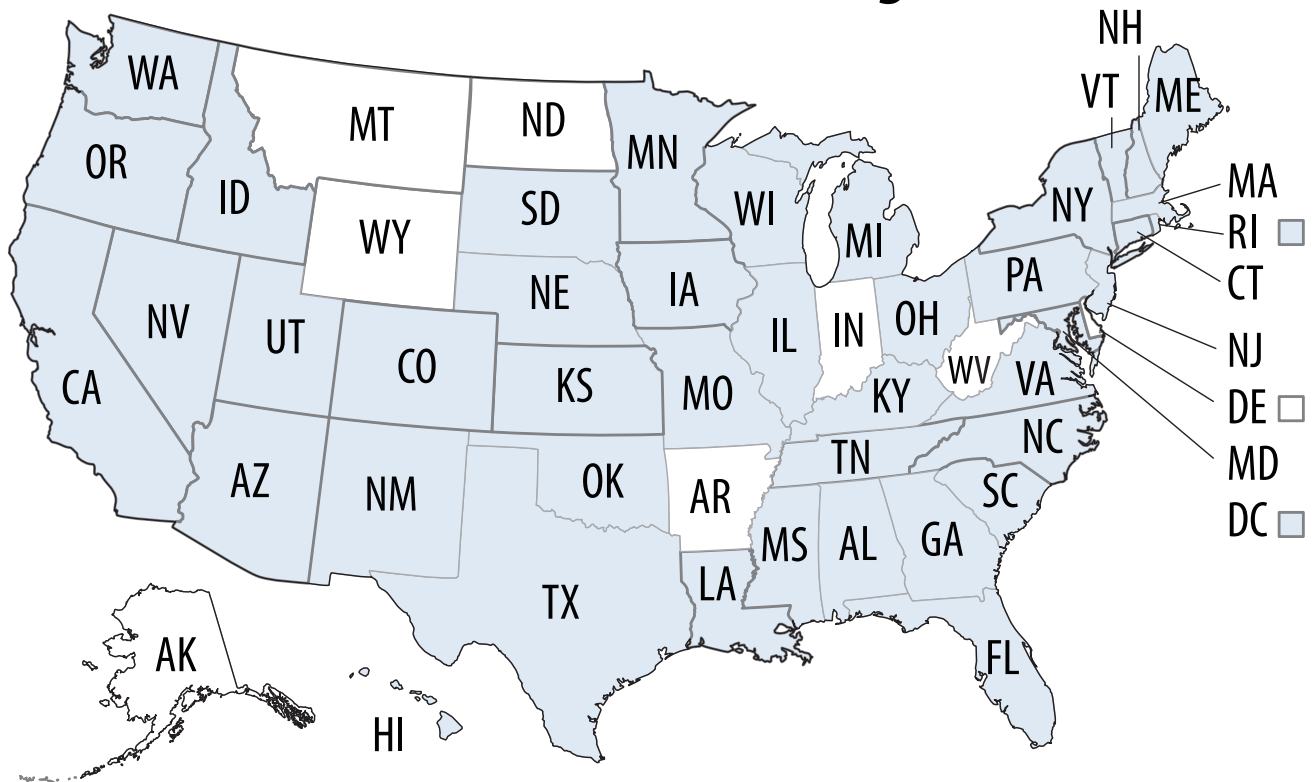
1. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).
2. Doreen Rappaport, *Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2007).

**DALE WEISS** teaches third grade at *La Escuela Fratney*, a Spanish-English immersion public elementary school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Student names have been changed. A version of this article originally appeared in *Rethinking Schools* in Summer 2011, at [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)



**Vice President of the Wisconsin Council for the Social Studies James Hartwick (left, above flag) and fellow University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Professor Eric Compas (right, wearing gloves), at the end of their 42-mile walk to protest state budget cuts, are joined by K-college educators, students, state legislators, and others at the Capitol in Madison on March 24, 2011. Read about it at [ericcompas.wordpress.com/2011/03/23/truth-to-power-pilgrimage](http://ericcompas.wordpress.com/2011/03/23/truth-to-power-pilgrimage). (Photo by Lori Compas)**

# 42 States Have Projected Shortfalls for the Coming Year



Source: CBPP survey

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities | [cbpp.org](http://cbpp.org)

## Budget Woes (and the Cost of War) for 42 States

In fiscal year 2012, some 42 states and the District of Columbia have closed, or are working to close, \$103 billion in budget gaps.<sup>1</sup> These gaps come on top of the large shortfalls the states faced in fiscal years 2009–2011. States will continue to struggle to find the revenue needed to support critical public services like education, health care, and human services for a number of years. Among other impacts, this means that state actions will continue to be a drag on the national economy, threatening hundreds of thousands of private- and public-sector jobs, reducing the job creation that otherwise would be expected to occur.

Weak housing markets could depress property tax revenues, increasing the likelihood that local governments will look to states to help address the squeeze on local and education budgets.

In states facing budget gaps, the consequences are severe in many cases—for residents as well as the economy. To date, budget difficulties have led at least 46 states to reduce services for their residents, including some of their most vulnerable families and individuals. Over 30 states have raised taxes to at least some degree, in some cases quite significantly.

If revenue remains depressed at low levels, as is expected in many states, additional spending and service cuts are likely. Budget cuts often are more severe later in a state fiscal crisis, after largely depleted reserves are no longer an option for closing deficits.

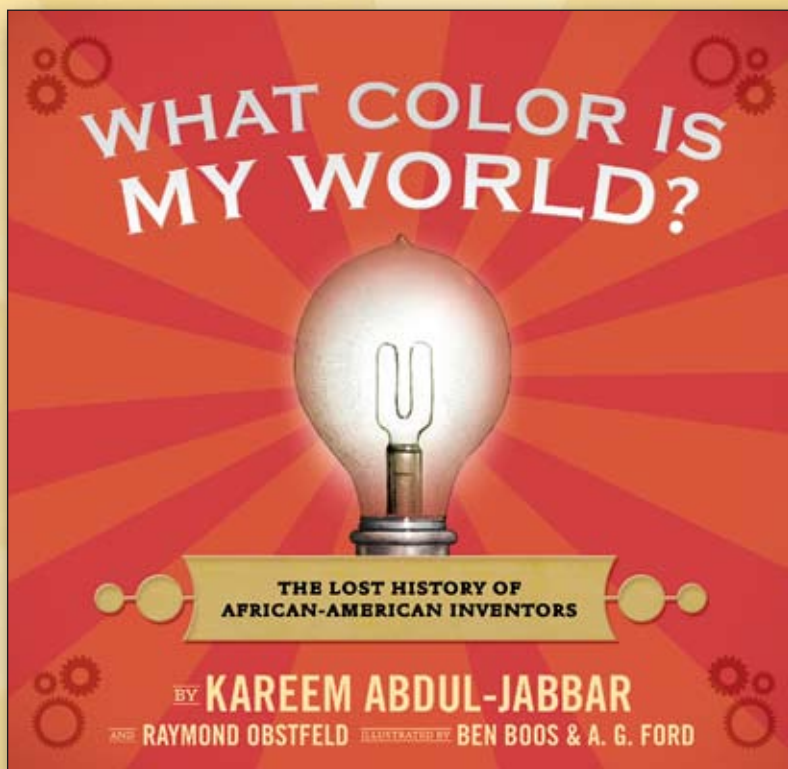
Meanwhile, the financial cost to the United States of foreign wars since 2001 is estimated to be between \$1.2 trillion and \$3.7 trillion.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a low-end, roughly estimated average for the cost of these recent wars is \$24 billion per state.

### Notes

1. “States Continue to Feel Recession’s Impact,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (June 17, 2011), [www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org).
2. Estimates by [costofwar.com](http://costofwar.com) (as of September 1, 2011) and by Reuters (June 29, 2011), respectively, [www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/29/usa-war-idUSN1E75R1DP20110629](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/29/usa-war-idUSN1E75R1DP20110629).

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— Kareem Abdul-Jabbar



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