



Tough Answers to Tough Questions

The best weapon to fight tough questions is an on-going, proactive public relations program. PR efforts like those described in this kit, help prevent hostile questions from ever arising. They require a consistent communications effort, but they are easier to accomplish than to turn around negative community attitudes. Nonetheless, even the best communicators can get hit with a hostile question. So some tough answers for tough questions are below:

With taxes so high and many jobs on the line, why should I vote yes to support this district's budget and thus raise my taxes?

The law prohibits me from advocating for or against the school budget. But I can say this: In light of the global economic slowdown, it is more important than ever to get to the polls and vote. Protecting the quality of our children's education is the most important way we can prepare them for good colleges and/or good jobs in the increasingly competitive global marketplace.

Our district's budget is a lean one that has been governed by a new state law that caps both administrative spending and the overall budget. In addition, the executive county superintendent has specific authority to modify our district's budget if some of its costs are out of line. When a budget is defeated with these "brakes" in place, it means the district loses financial resources forever, even when the economy recovers.

At a time when we have to cut the budget, shouldn't this be a key time to reduce staff?

Both teachers and administrators are key players in the quality of our students' education. As principal, I am the school's instructional leader and responsible for the quality of our educational programs and the hiring, firing, and management of our excellent staff. I make sure our school is not only safe, but a well disciplined community of learners. I am also charged with managing the school building, equipment, and grounds. I am where the buck stops regarding our students' welfare and safety. And of course, I must communicate with you and other residents about all of these concerns. Today, principals and other school administrators inspire teachers to be effective and school support personnel to work efficiently. We lead the school so that teachers can focus on your children.

Why do we have so many school administrators?

It is a common misperception that we have "too many" administrators. According to the USDOE's National Center for Education Statistics, New Jersey ranks 40th in the nation in terms of administrative costs. We spend below the national average on administrative expenditures (NJ 9.7%, USA 10.8%) and well below the national average on building-based school leaders as a percentage of school staff (NJ 1.86%, USA 2.76%). If the local staff to building-based school leader ratio is good, use it: In our district, we have an even lower ratio of ##%.

In New Jersey, our administrative expenses have consistently been well below average, although we are the wealthiest state in the nation. New state laws already cap administrative spending and cap the overall school budget. Efficient administrative spending is a precondition for budget approval and presentation to the voters. The executive county superintendent has expanded budget authority and the specific charge of increasing administrative efficiencies with specific authority to modify a district's budget if those costs are out of line.

The term "administrative expenses" covers a broad class of activities. It includes everything from the school secretaries' salaries to the pencils and paper they use to the copy machines, the software in our offices, our postage machine, and our electronic communications system.

These are very tough economic times for our community. Why shouldn't school administrators and teachers have to tighten their belts just like the rest of us? You have a safe and secure pension and get health benefits for life. Millions of Americans like me have lost their jobs. Our 401Ks have lost value, and when my COBRA ends, I will have no health insurance. How can we afford your benefits?

The short answer is that our district must offer competitive salaries and benefits to its professional staff because our children deserve the best education possible. It is an investment in their future. Competitive salaries and benefits are necessary to recruit and retain the best professionals for our students.

But let me say, I empathize with your position. In many fields, employees have been dealt a crushing blow. There is economic pain in our community. Families are hurting. I understand that, and our school staff has worked hard to make every dollar pay dividends for our students. (Give an example of an extraordinary step you have taken.) Our job is to make sure that our students do not pay a price for an economic situation they had nothing to do with. And if I may say so, our staff is doing that very well. (Give examples of the school's successes.)

My concern is with academic results. How would you characterize the school's academic performance, and are you satisfied with that?

I am proud of our school's academic achievements, but can never feel satisfied. According to Education Week's Annual Quality Counts Report, New Jersey ranks fifth in the nation overall on a wide range of educational indicators. We can be proud of this because our state has a large number of immigrants who are English Language Learners. Clearly, we are working hard to educate all our students. We can also be proud that our district (or school) is above the state average in important areas: List the most important areas where your district (or school) beats the state average according to the NJ School Report Card (<http://education.state.nj.us/rc/>). Having said that, we know we can never be satisfied until every child in our school is reaching his or her full capacity to learn and grow. That's a goal that school leaders, teachers, and staff share with parents — our partners in education.