



Chapter XXIII

Community Participation in the Design of the Seattle Public Schools' Budget Builder Web Site

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This chapter provides a case study of the development of an Internet-based budgeting tool for the Seattle Public Schools, known as the Budget Builder. In particular, I describe the ways in which community participation affected the design and final outcome of the system. The Budget Builder project was unusual for a technical project because of its major focus on community participation. Although participation was stymied to some extent, the project can be seen as a success for community access. In the case study, I summarize the use of the Budget Builder over its first two years; describe the community participation and user input present in the design process; examine the social structure surrounding the Budget Builder, especially the division of power among the three main groups working on the project, and how those power relationships affected the final version of the project; and discuss some technical issues that appeared during the course of the project.

Project Overview

This chapter examines the development of the Seattle Public Schools' Budget Builder World Wide Web site. This site was designed as a tool to simplify and

explain the process of budgeting at the local school level. A large team with members from the Graduate School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, the Seattle Public Schools, and Seattle residents combined to produce the current system. As of this writing, the project is continuing; this chapter covers the first stages of the development of the Web site, from Autumn 1996 until the first official use of the Web site in April 1998.

The Players

The Seattle Public Schools (SPS) refers to the public school district in Seattle, Washington. SPS is a complicated enterprise consisting of several different groups, including the school administration, the principals, the school staff, the teachers, and the teachers union, the Seattle Education Association (SEA).

The Seattle Schools is one of the few school districts in the United States moving forward to decentralize their funding and to give schools control over much of their budgets. SPS is more progressive than most districts in making budgets public, particularly through the Budget Builder. After a presentation of the Budget Builder to the Teachers Union Reform Network (the progressive wing of the national teachers unions), several union members expressed amazement that the Seattle School district would freely provide so much information.

Within the school administration, the Budget Builder was considered primarily a principals' budgeting tool. For that reason, the district's budget office was the department most involved in developing the system, although people from human resources and information systems were key participants at various times.

The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (CCC) is a non-profit organization based in Chicago that has school reform projects in several cities in North America. Cross City's interest in this project was furthering the movement towards school-based budgeting in Seattle. Cross City has supported school-based budgeting for many years, most actively in Chicago. From a community activist's point of view, school-based budgeting can provide an opportunity for communities to have a say in how their local schools are run, by moving financial decision-making authority to the schools. Communities can learn more about the details of school budgets and take part in linking budgets to goals for academic achievement.

The University of Washington Graduate School of Public Affairs (GSPA) is devoted to public policy training and practice. Its academic programs are geared towards Masters-level students heading into careers with public and nonprofit organizations. The faculty in the department are connected with organizations outside the university, and consequently, their research focus is often directed towards public institutions. While GSPA did not provide any official funding for the project, it sponsored the project indirectly by providing office space, equipment, personnel time, and official support from the university president.

The Scenario

The Seattle Public School District dramatically changed their school funding system in the fall of 1996. Before then, almost all of each school's resources were determined by the district's central administration. Using a method referred to as "staffing standards," each school's staffing level—both administrators and teachers—was determined centrally, based on the projected number of students. The

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