

# Music IS Education

## Monitoring the School Budget Process

### A Guide for Arts Education Advocates

#### Why Monitoring School Budgets Matters for Arts Education

School budgets reflect a district's values and priorities. Decisions about staffing, instructional time, materials, facilities, and student access are embedded in budget documents long before final approval. Because arts education programs are often vulnerable to reductions, **early and consistent monitoring of the budget process is essential** to protect and strengthen music and arts learning opportunities for students.

By engaging early in the budget cycle, advocates can:

- Understand how arts programs are funded
- Identify potential risks before decisions are finalized
- Communicate the value of arts education to decision-makers
- Prevent budget surprises late in the process

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#### Core Principle for Advocates

To be effective, **someone representing arts education must consistently attend school board meetings throughout the budget cycle.**

This does not need to be the same person each time, but there must be a regular arts-informed presence to identify early warning signs and report back to the advocacy community.

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#### The Typical School Budget Cycle

*(Timelines vary by state and district, but the sequence is consistent nationwide.)*

#### Step 1: Budget Development Begins

##### Typical Timing: Fall

- The budget process is usually initiated by the superintendent or chief business/financial officer.
- District staff gather enrollment data, staffing projections, and program needs.
- Early planning assumptions are established.

### **Key Documents to Request**

- **Budget assumptions statement** (financial assumptions, staffing formulas)
- **Budget calendar** outlining major decision points

### **Advocacy Focus**

- Learn who controls budget development.
- Begin conversations with board members about their views on arts education.
- Ensure arts programs are considered part of core instructional planning.

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## **Step 2: Board Committee Review**

### **Typical Timing: Late Fall / Early Winter**

- A board finance or operations committee reviews budget concepts.
- Members ask questions, request revisions, and discuss spending priorities.
- Early signals about staffing levels and program funding may emerge.

### **Advocacy Focus**

- Attend committee meetings whenever possible.
- Track discussions related to staffing, course offerings, and program scope.
- Identify board members who are influential in budget decisions.

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## **Step 3: Preliminary Budget Presented to the Public**

### **Typical Timing: Winter**

- The administration presents a preliminary budget during a public board meeting.
- Budget documents become publicly available for review.
- This is often the **first clear look** at potential program changes.

### **Advocacy Focus**

- Review documents for:
  - Staffing reductions
  - Course or program eliminations
  - Resource constraints affecting arts instruction
- Prepare questions or concerns for board members and administrators.

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## **Step 4: State or External Funding Information Released**

### **Typical Timing: Mid-Winter**

- State aid or other major funding allocations are announced.
- Revenue changes may lead to revisions in the proposed budget.
- District leadership reassesses priorities based on updated funding.

### **Advocacy Focus**

- Monitor whether funding shifts are used to justify reductions to arts programs.
- Ask how arts education fits into revised financial assumptions.
- Reinforce that short-term enrollment fluctuations should not drive long-term cuts.

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## **Step 5: Detailed Budget Publication**

### **Typical Timing: Late Winter / Early Spring**

- The full, detailed budget is formally published.
- The window for public input is often short.
- Changes are still possible, but time is limited.

### **Advocacy Focus**

- Compare the proposed budget to prior years.
- Identify trends in arts staffing, instructional time, and resources.
- Communicate concerns immediately to decision-makers

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## **Step 6: Tentative Budget Approval**

### **Typical Timing: Early Spring**

- The board approves a tentative budget.
- The budget may be submitted for external review, depending on state rules.

### **Advocacy Focus**

- Continue attending meetings even if outcomes seem set.
- Document commitments or statements made by board members.
- Prepare for public testimony if hearings are required.

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## **Step 7: Public Hearing**

### **Typical Timing: Spring**

- One or more public hearings allow community input on the budget.
- Feedback becomes part of the public record.
- Major changes are harder but not impossible.

### **Advocacy Focus**

- Provide clear, concise testimony on the value of arts education.
- Coordinate messages with parents, educators, and community partners.
- Emphasize student impact, equity, and long-term benefits.

## **Step 8: Final Budget Adoption**

### **Typical Timing: Late Spring**

- The board adopts the final budget for the coming school year.
- Funding levels and program structures are finalized.

### **Advocacy Focus**

- Track outcomes and document lessons learned.
- Thank board members and administrators who supported arts education.
- Begin preparing for the next budget cycle.

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### **Key Advocacy Messages to Reinforce Throughout the Process**

- Arts education supports student well-being, engagement, and learning.
- Arts programs should be treated as core instructional offerings, not optional extras.
- Temporary enrollment changes should not result in permanent program cuts.
- Strong arts programs contribute to school culture, student connection, and community support.

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### **Final Guidance for Arts Advocates**

Monitoring a school budget requires persistence, preparation, and coordination. The most effective advocates:

- Show up consistently
- Ask informed questions early
- Build relationships with decision-makers
- Share information across the arts education community

Being present and informed is the most powerful advocacy tool available.

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### **Source**

Adapted and generalized from a school budget process guide originally developed by Bob Morrison for Arts Ed NJ.