

The Grid: A Framework to Explore Budgeting Choices

THE GRID helps school, district, and state leaders strategically weigh proposed investments to assess which can do the most for students with the dollars at hand. It offers a roadmap for deciding what budget options to pursue, and which to sustain, modify, or cut to meet evolving student needs and academic goals.

With this tool, leaders connect investments with desired (and measurable) outcomes; estimate how effective investments are likely to be; flag risks that might get in the way of effectiveness; proactively brainstorm ways to mitigate those risks; make costs clear by putting investments in per-student terms; and evaluate progress once implemented.

Importantly, leaders can use The Grid to link their spending choices to desired outcomes. Doing so helps focus everyone's behavior—and daily work—toward delivering on those outcomes.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Investment	Major Cost Factors	Estimated # Students Served	Cost Per Participating Student	Desired Outcomes — Estimated Effectiveness (High/Med/Low)	Risks	Once Implemented, Is It Working? (Check Data)
A	Tutoring: 1-to-1 student-teacher ratio 3x/week, 36 weeks	Tutors = \$30/hour	308 students (highest-needs students?)	\$1,000,000/308 = \$3,240	Math and reading scores increase Grades increase ---- Promising	Some students may not attend; no peer interaction; difficulty hiring tutors	
B	Tutoring: 4-to-1 student-teacher ratio 3x/week, 36 weeks	Tutors = \$30/hour	1,232 max	\$811	Boost achievement SEL benefits ---- Promising	Some students may not attend; difficulty hiring tutors	
C	Adding specialist staff after school	\$100,000 per FTE = 1 per school	4,000	\$250	SEL needs are met, so students attend and learn	Difficulty hiring; uneven access across schools	
D	Adding reading coaches	\$100,000 per FTE = 1 per school	4,000	\$250	Reading scores increase ---- Promising	Difficulty hiring	

COLUMN 1 // Consider different investment options.

Smart spending requires that leaders consider a range of different options. Cost-equivalent options can include existing investments or proposed alternatives. In the example below, we offer options for spending \$1 million for the goal of improving 3rd grade reading outcomes.

COLUMN 2 // Determine major cost factors.

Penciling out the cost factors can help everyone in the system see where the money is going and how much is spent on various inputs. Labor costs should include both salary and benefits. In the planning stages, this step needn't require precision: think "back-of-envelope costs" not "down-to-the-penny accounting."

COLUMNS 3 & 4 // Estimate the number of students served and cost per participating student.

These figures can help users see how many students will be affected and at what cost per student. If the cost is high for each participating student, users should expect greater or more certain value. If more students can be reached, there's upside to that too. When comparing Options A and B, one would deliver more intense 1-1 tutoring, but the other reaches more students, and possibly has fewer risks. Depending on the district needs, either might be the preferred option.

COLUMN 5 // Define a desired, measurable outcome and estimate effectiveness (high/medium/low).

Being clear about the desired outcomes helps get everyone on the same page and drives daily work toward the goal. Where possible, it helps to acknowledge how progress toward achieving desired outcomes will be measured. Option C, “Social-emotional learning needs are met,” is a desired goal. But how will progress be measured? Improved attendance? Fewer behavioral problems? Test scores need not be the only metric. Ideally leaders would review metrics on a regular basis (better to measure monthly or quarterly than wait a year). Where test score improvements are the objective, are there intermediate goals that can demonstrate progress or signal needed adjustments?

COLUMN 6 // Acknowledge risks to achieving the desired outcome. Are there ways to mitigate risks?

Leaders can invite those charged with implementation to identify likely risks and then brainstorm scenarios to mitigate them. In Options A and B, students might not show up for tutoring. Mitigation could include offering incentives for attendance, texting reminders to families, or even reiterating to families that a missed session is money wasted. Some leaders may choose Option B because it’s less risky. (If a student doesn’t show, the tutor still has three others to work with.)

In trainings using The Grid, we’ve heard district leaders say that some investments can’t be considered at all because they aren’t allowed under the terms of their bargaining agreement. We suggest keeping those options on The Grid, and acknowledging as a risk that the union may not grant a Memo of Understanding (MOU). In some cases, districts have reopened the contract and worked with labor partners to make promising ideas doable.

COLUMN 7 // Review implementation and measure outcomes.

It’s helpful to set a regular pace for reviewing implementation progress (look at your data) and have robust conversations about what is and isn’t working. For example, if this district settled on Option A but hasn’t been able to find tutors, leaders may pivot to another option to make sure students get reading intervention this year. Adjusting as needed can keep the focus on maximizing the investment for students.

Finally, use THE GRID as a communication tool, both inside and outside the school system.

We encourage leaders to use The Grid to talk often about money invested alongside goals. Remember those counselors from Option C? Make clear that the investment in counselors is to improve attendance among the 300 chronically absent students. And the tutoring in Options A and B? Principals can regularly remind tutors and parents that the investment is to improve reading, but that will happen only if students show up and tutors start on time. For contracted tutors? Embed expectations in the contract: Set performance targets and require tutors to assemble progress data and minimize identified risks. And in the process, leaders can update The Grid with any additional goals, measures, or risks uncovered in these key conversations.

THE GRID can be used in budget workshops and throughout the fiscal year to assess current and proposed investments on their own and relative to competing spending options, and when making procurement decisions and outlining vendor contract terms. Central office leaders can use The Grid when gathering budget requests from individual schools or departments. It can be helpful in meetings with staff, families, and communities to get engagement on goals, make financial tradeoffs clear, and offer transparency into the decision-making process.

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