

School budget black holes

Wendy Collins



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‘Doing more with less’ is a constant challenge for school leaders. Federal and State Government educational funding is often a political football, bringing uncertainty about revenue opportunities or grant allocations. Private schools are reluctant to pass on real cost rises through increased tuition fees, for fear of losing enrolments. Simultaneously, there will be increasing demands for better, faster or shinier resources and facilities, and larger staff salaries. School bursars typically complain that in recent years, their financial resources are being stretched more thinly than ever before.

In the last issue of *Education Today*, I outlined the importance of educating yourself about the budget process. The budget is an integral part of your strategic annual planning and an effective budget allows you to monitor and successfully control the management of your school’s finances. Consider it both a major planning instrument and a ‘yardstick’ against which your actual financial performance should be compared. Your aim should be to create a budget which deploys resources to meet your school’s financial targets in the most cost-effective manner.

There are, however, some costs which can be potential problems for many schools. Two expenditure items are notorious for creating ‘budget black holes’; those unseen vortices which can suck dry your school finances in the blink of an eye, unless properly controlled.

The two problem areas of expenditure are staffing costs, particularly for relief staff, and information technology.

1 Staffing and relief staff costs

Staffing costs are the largest budget line of recurrent expenditure. You want good quality, experienced staff, and you need to remunerate them appropriately. Ensure you have also factored in other ‘on-costs’, such as superannuation, sick leave and long service leave allowances, which can add significantly to your outlays.

In determining your appropriate staffing

mix, the starting point is to consider your subject offerings. For example, if you have declining numbers of students choosing drama or Japanese, is it time to make the tough decision to eliminate these subject choices and thereby reduce staffing?

A significantly large and somewhat unpredictable cost can be the hiring of relief (supply) teachers. A common criticism of relief staff is that sometimes they do little more than baby sit classes, and perform an occasional lunchtime supervision duty. They are not subject to significant preparation or marking demands and are not required to write report cards, attend planning meetings, school functions, or parent teacher nights, yet they are paid a handsome rate for their day’s work.

Have you considered instead, hiring a permanent relief staff member? The annual salary of one full-time staff member to fill unexpected vacancies due to illness, excursions, special leave etc, may bring not only cost savings but additional benefits of a more engaged and committed member of staff. Such an appointee can also assist with other activities in the school, such as training a sporting team, or coaching a debating group.

Some schools also invest in ‘staff health and wellbeing initiatives’, aimed at reducing the number of sick leave days that members of staff take. One example is offering free influenza vaccinations. This relatively small investment could save thousands in relief staff wages, and protect teachers from falling victim to illness, particularly when they are in close proximity to large numbers of children. Other schools provide professional development seminars on topics such as health and fitness, mental health awareness and stress reduction techniques.

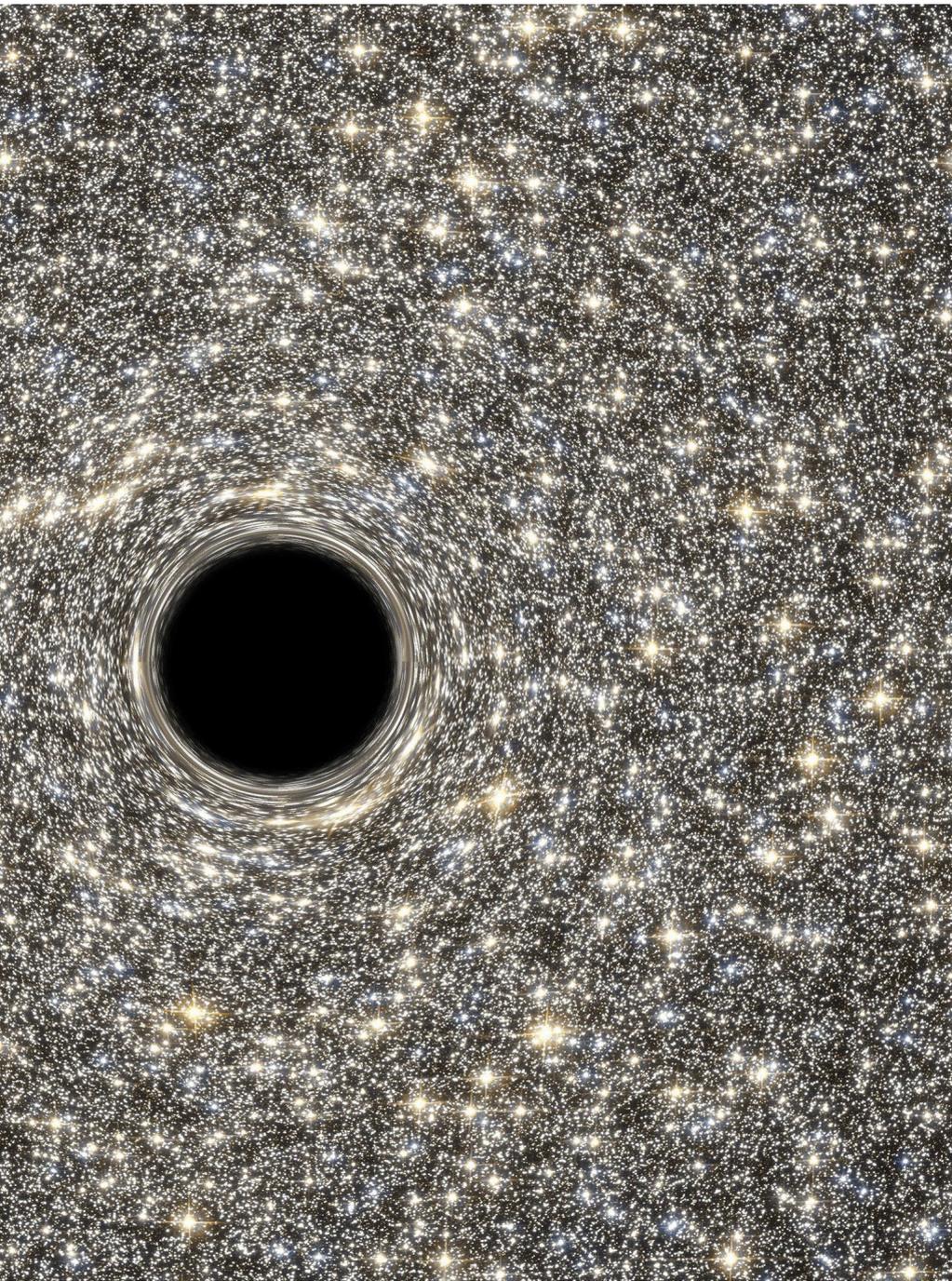
Is it also time to review the effectiveness and efficiency of your teacher aides? Are their skills being used appropriately? Have you trained your classroom teachers to adequately communicate with them, regarding how they can best help the children they have been specifically allocated to assist? Do they take initiative sometimes, or do they merely sit at the back of the classroom,



adding only token assistance to the students’ learning and the teachers they are paid to assist?

2 Information technology

Teachers, students and parents have increasing demands and expectations regarding the quality and availability of IT in schools. I asked both an experienced principal of a secondary school and also a relatively new young teacher, what they expected from IT, and what they perceived as the most important related issues. I was surprised that their responses were very similar. I expected the younger Gen Y teacher to have high demands for up-to-date technology and resources. What he said, however, echoed the principal’s comments, “There is a false perception that all IT is good. We need to stop



using technology just for the sake of technology. Some things can be done better by pen and paper". This was an interesting perspective from a 'digital native' who has an Apple Mac and uses video clips to enhance many of his science lessons.

So, for budgeting purposes, school leaders need to remember that the latest, newest and best is not necessarily needed. IT companies will try to convince you that you need to be at the leading edge but sometimes this can mean that you are also the first to experience all the glitches in the product.

Licensing is another hidden cost of any new software program. For example, your graphics department might like the latest Revit software, but have they fully costed this, to include the

number of licences required for adding such a program to all the computers in their labs?

Many schools are adopting laptop programs for all of their students. Even though you may levy families for these items, have you fully costed this initiative, when setting the annual levy? It is easy to underestimate other related costs, such as maintenance, insurance, staff wages to service the equipment, purchase of filtering software and software program costs, upgrades of the wireless network, the server and other infrastructure. Don't rush into a decision before doing extensive research. A NSW school principal took advice from an enthusiastic salesman and adopted an iPad program for all students, solely because these devices were cheaper than laptops. However, the principal

and IT department had not consulted with teachers to assess the learning requirements desired from such equipment. Teachers and students soon became frustrated by the limited functions, inadequate keyboard, small screen, lack of referencing functionality, and the inconvenience of having to save to a USB and transfer files to a desktop every time a document needed to be printed.

The young teacher I spoke with said that another incorrect perception is that "every classroom needs an interactive whiteboard". Most of the expensive interactive whiteboards are underutilised and, sadly, end up being nothing more than a fancy screen, which is not able to be written on with regular whiteboard markers. Smart boards are expensive and before investing in them, explore whether existing programs on your computers can do similar tasks.

Another teacher, who attended a large educational technology exhibition recently, came away confused and overwhelmed. She said that she felt like a "Chihuahua surrounded by a pack of hungry wolf hounds". The sales spins were smooth, and she was bewildered by the conflicting claims. The best advice when considering IT needs for your school is that you need to first sit down with teachers and IT staff, and determine your needs and strategic goals. Do your homework and develop a plan. Network with other school leaders and IT staff and get objective advice. Take a conservative approach, because although IT changes so quickly, you don't necessarily need to have the biggest and the latest. You want the best fit for your organisation. There is a trade-off between not getting left behind and paying a premium for being 'cutting edge'. Beware of falling into the trap that you need to purchase every latest shiny new fad.

Every time funds are spent on technology, relief staff, or insufficiently-assessed black hole items of expenditure, then remaining funds are less available to spend on class room facilities, buying science lab equipment, expanding library resources, or sending teachers to a professional development conference. There will be many competing demands presented to you. The best budgets will be those that are most appropriately aligned to your school's overall strategic and annual goals and should always be expected to directly or indirectly improve educational opportunities for students. Remember, schools exist for students and their learning, not for teachers, nor for computer companies.

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