

Case 18: Why is the theater curtain still falling apart?

The district's proposed budget is \$48 million, the school theater curtain won't close, and Dec wants to ask the school board about it.

On your own Read What happened and underline the three dollar amounts. About 4 minutes.



Anika, Dec and Mari test a small light circuit in a theater workshop, with Pauta beside them.

Your role: You're the one who works out the per-student number before anyone repeats the post. **New skill:** Compare numbers on the same scale.

What happened

The curtain in the school theater is torn, and it no longer closes all the way. Dec, 17, pulls that curtain at every show. He and Anika, 16, are on the theater crew. The facilities office gave the theater advisor a quote to replace the curtain: \$6,800.

Mari, 19, is helping them prepare a question for the school board. They find the district's proposed budget for next school year. The total is \$48 million for a projected 3,200 students. One line sets aside \$310,000 for building repairs at all schools. A note says the figures may change before the board adopts the budget.

On Tuesday at 6:10 p.m., a post starts going around. It compares the district's \$48 million with another district, Westbrook, at \$21,000 per student. "And they can't fix ONE curtain??" it asks. Dec has a photo of the torn curtain. He wants to be the one who asks the board about it.

Your question: What can the \$48 million total tell Dec about the curtain, and what should he ask the school board?

Key terms

On your own Read each key term and its example, then write your first guess in the box. About 4 minutes.

Revenue Revenue is money that comes into a government or an organization, such as taxes and grants.

En español: ingresos

In this case: NCES reports that public schools get revenue from federal, state and local sources. That national data cannot show what Dec's district spends on a curtain.

Expenditure An expenditure is money that a government or an organization spends.

En español: gasto

In this case: The \$48 million is a proposed plan for next school year. It lists planned expenditures, but none of that money has been spent yet.

Per-pupil amount A per-pupil amount is a total divided by the number of students, so that districts of different sizes can be compared.

En español: monto por estudiante

In this case: $\$48,000,000 \div 3,200 \text{ students} = \$15,000 \text{ per student}$. Westbrook's \$21,000 is already per student, but its year and stage are unknown.

Who is involved



Mari

Helping the theater crew with a budget question

"Forty-eight million dollars, and the curtain still won't close. Ay, bendito. Before we get mad at the big number, which line is supposed to fix it?"



Dec

Pulls the curtain at every show

"I pull that curtain every show. It doesn't close all the way anymore. That part I can show you."

Before you look at the evidence, why do you think the theater curtain is still not fixed?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Reading passage

Budget literacy and the politics of a number

On your own Read the passage. At each Stop and think box, pause and answer the question in your head or with a partner. About 5 minutes.

Words to know

- **Revenue:** Revenue is money that comes into a government or an organization, such as taxes and grants.
- **Expenditure:** An expenditure is money that a government or an organization spends.
- **Per-pupil amount:** A per-pupil amount is a total divided by the number of students, so that districts of different sizes can be compared.
- **Proposal:** A proposal is a change that someone suggests and that has not been approved yet.
- **Decision-maker:** A decision-maker is the person or group with the power to make a particular choice.

The story: A local need and a viral comparison

A high school's stage curtain is torn and no longer closes. Dec, 17, pulls it at every performance. Facilities has priced a replacement at \$6,800. With Anika, 16, and Mari, 19, Dec plans to raise it with the school board, and he insists on asking in person.

The district's proposed budget for next year lists \$48,000,000 for a projected 3,200 students and \$310,000 for building repairs across all schools. It notes that the figures may change before adoption. Then a post circulates on Tuesday evening. It pairs the district's \$48 million with a neighboring district's \$21,000 per student and asks why one curtain cannot be fixed.

The post is persuasive because its underlying grievance is real. The curtain is broken. Its numbers, however, are incommensurable. Mari's response models budget literacy. She reads the labels before reacting to the magnitude. "Proposed" means next year's plan, not this year's spending. The units must be checked. And she asks which line could plausibly fund a curtain at all.

Your role is to work out the per-student number before anyone repeats the post.

❓ Stop and think. Why is a per-pupil figure a measure of resources rather than adequacy?

Commensurability and the chain of decisions

Comparisons require commensurable figures, meaning the same year, the same stage and the same unit. A **per-pupil amount** is a total divided by the number of students, so that districts of different sizes can be compared. The district's proposed per-pupil figure is \$15,000, which is \$48,000,000 divided by 3,200. Only after that conversion does a comparison with Westbrook become possible, and it remains incomplete while Westbrook's year and stage are unknown. Even a perfect comparison would measure resources, not adequacy. A per-pupil figure cannot say whether students' needs are met.

The case's vocabulary distinguishes flows from plans. **Revenue** is money that comes into a government or an organization, such as taxes and grants. An **expenditure** is money that a government or an organization spends. The document at hand is a **proposal**, a change that someone suggests and that has not been approved yet, in Case 4's terms. It is distinct from the adopted budget and from actual spending.

The case also completes a sequence of numerical skills. Case 5 introduced line-by-line reading of a financial document. Case 11 required comparing situations on the same terms. Case 13 required keeping a claim as small as the evidence. Here, Mari applies the first two to the budget, and Dec applies the third to his own evidence. His photo establishes the tear. It says nothing about where funds went, so he declines to speculate.

Case 4's **decision-maker**, the person or group with the power to make a particular choice, locates authority. The school board adopts the budget within state and federal rules, so it, not the principal, is the right audience. An effective question names a line, a need and a procedural moment: which line covers stage equipment, what the \$6,800 request would require and when the board hears requests before adoption.

 **Stop and think.** How should an advocate handle a viral claim that supports their cause but uses bad numbers?

Finance, evidence and professional duty

School revenue combines federal, state and local sources in proportions that vary by state (NCES, May 2024). NCES publishes state-by-state revenue with per-pupil amounts for 2022–23 (NCES Digest table 235.20, March 2026). Those figures give context and cannot stand in for a district's own adopted budget. Local property-tax reliance produces large disparities (NPR, April 18, 2016). The trade-off between local control and equity is itself a policy debate (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, October 10, 2024).

Budgets also change with circumstances. The expiration of federal pandemic relief created a funding cliff for many districts (Chalkbeat, September 13, 2023). By 2026, many districts were cutting programs and staff because of inflation and falling enrollment (Chalkbeat, May 28, 2026).

Finance, evidence and professional duty, continued

The stakes are measurable. Jackson, Johnson and Persico found that increases in per-pupil spending from school finance reforms raised educational attainment and adult earnings, particularly for low-income students (Quarterly Journal of Economics, October 1, 2015).

Professional codes apply to both sides of Dec's question. ASPA asks public administrators to give governing boards "accurate, honest, comprehensive, and timely information and advice" (ASPA Code of Ethics, 2013). The NCA credo holds "truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason" to be "essential to the integrity of communication" (NCA Credo for Ethical Communication, 2024). The TV connection adds a cultural lens. In Abbott Elementary's pilot, a principal spends money on a sign while teachers need supplies (ABC, December 7, 2021). A TV show cannot settle a real budget, but its question is the case's question: which line, and who decided?

? **Stop and think.** What procedural knowledge does Dec need to turn a grievance into a question the board must answer?

Sources

Real source | National Center for Education Statistics | May 2024

Public School Revenue Sources (Condition of Education)

Real source | National Center for Education Statistics | March 2026

Revenue sources for public schools by state, 2022–23 (Digest table 235.20)

Real source | NPR | April 18, 2016

Why America's Schools Have A Money Problem

Real source | Lincoln Institute of Land Policy | October 10, 2024

Balancing Act: The Property Tax—School Funding Dilemma

Real source | Chalkbeat | September 13, 2023

Schools face a funding cliff. How bad will the fall be?

Real source | Chalkbeat | May 28, 2026

A financial reckoning is hitting America's public schools

Real source | The Quarterly Journal of Economics (Jackson, Johnson & Persico) | October 1, 2015

The Effects of School Spending on Educational and Economic Outcomes: Evidence from School Finance Reforms

Real source | American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) | 2013

ASPA Code of Ethics

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Look at the evidence

On your own Read each document and write what it shows and what it leaves out. About 8 minutes.

Evidence A | Budget excerpt

The proposed budget for next school year

PROPOSED BUDGET, NEXT SCHOOL YEAR. Total proposed budget: \$48,000,000. Projected enrollment: 3,200 students. Facilities, building repairs (all schools): \$310,000. Note: figures are proposed and may change before the board adopts the budget.

Look closely: Circle the year, the stage and the unit for each number.

What it shows

What it leaves out

Evidence B | Social media post

A post shared Tuesday at 6:10 p.m.

Our district: \$48 MILLION. Westbrook: \$21,000 per student. And they can't fix ONE curtain?? Where is the money going?

Look closely: Which number is a total, and which is per student?

What it shows

What it leaves out

Look at the evidence, continued

Evidence C | Repair quote

The facilities quote for a new curtain

Stage curtain replacement, main auditorium: remove the torn curtain, supply and install a flame-retardant replacement. Total: \$6,800.

Look closely: What does the quote confirm, and who received it?

What it shows

What it leaves out

What is still missing from the evidence?

Notes

Key idea: per-pupil amounts

On your own Read the key idea and the code of ethics, then answer the question in the box. About 12 minutes.

Before you compare two budget numbers, check three labels: the year, the stage and the unit. An **expenditure** is money that a government or an organization spends. A proposed budget is a plan for expenditures. An adopted budget is the plan the board approves. Actual spending is what the district really spent. The \$48 million is a proposed total for the whole district. The Westbrook figure is an amount per student.

A **per-pupil amount** is a total divided by the number of students, so that districts of different sizes can be compared. Dec's district proposes \$48,000,000 for a projected 3,200 students. That works out to \$15,000 per student. The comparison is still not complete, because Westbrook's budget year and stage are unknown. A per-pupil figure also cannot show whether either district has enough for its students' needs.

Revenue is money that comes into a government or an organization, such as taxes and grants. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that public schools get revenue from federal, state and local sources. The mix differs from state to state. National data like this gives context, but it cannot say what one district spends on a curtain. In most states, an elected local school board adopts the budget within state and federal rules. That is why Dec's question should name one budget line, one need and the board's next chance to hear requests.

Professional standards

Real source | American Society for Public Administration (ASPA)

ASPA Code of Ethics: 5. Fully Inform and Advise

"Provide accurate, honest, comprehensive, and timely information and advice to elected and appointed officials and governing board members"

In plain words: ASPA members agree to give decision-makers, such as school board members, accurate and complete information.

Question: The \$6,800 curtain quote went to the theater advisor. What should the board see to rank that repair?

Professional standards, continued

Your answer

The board needs _____. Without it, _____.

In the news



Real source | NPR | April 18, 2016

Why America's Schools Have A Money Problem

Explains how local property taxes make school budgets very different from one district to the next.



Real source | Chalkbeat | May 28, 2026

A financial reckoning is hitting America's public schools

Big districts are making cuts, showing how a huge budget can still leave little for extras like a stage curtain.

Notes

Sort the evidence

On your own Trace the curtain request from the photo to the vote and fill in each box. About 8 minutes.

Trace the curtain request from the photo to the vote. Who ranks it, who adopts the budget, which rules limit them, and where can students speak?

Fund the \$6,800 curtain replacement next year

Who decides

The elected local school board, which adopts the budget

The facilities office, which ranks repair requests (how is still unknown)

Under which rule

State and federal rules and funding streams set limits on district budgets

Proposed building-repairs line: \$310,000 for all schools

Who lives with it

Your way in

Whose perspective is missing?

Whose view is missing from these documents? What would you ask them?

The view that is missing is _____. I would ask _____.

Practice: choose a response

On your own Choose what the crew should do first, explain why and fix the two marked phrases.
About 5 minutes.

A post compares the district's \$48 million total with Westbrook's \$21,000 per student. Someone reposts it and adds "we get way less." What should the crew do first?

- ☐ **A** Share it. Both figures are in dollars, and the curtain really is torn.
- ☐ **B** Check that both figures use the same year, budget stage and units before comparing them.
- ☐ **C** Divide \$48 million by 3,200 students, and post that the district is underfunded.

Why I chose it

Improve a draft

A student's first draft

Our district has a ① \$48 million budget but our theater curtain is ripped and gross. That's so much money and they can't even fix one curtain? It has been like this since before any of us joined the crew and it keeps getting worse every show. Where is all the money going? Other districts get way more. I saw a post that said so. We deserve better and ② the board needs to explain themselves. We are honestly tired of waiting for this.

Rewrite each marked phrase so it says only what the evidence supports.

Rewrite phrase 1

Rewrite phrase 2

College

Your task

On your own Read the steps and fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft. About 12 minutes.

Write a fact-check of the viral post for a local news site or a campus newspaper. Correct the comparison, show the math and say what the proposed budget can and cannot tell readers about the curtain.

Use: Case documents: the proposed-budget excerpt, the social post, the \$6,800 repair quote and Dec’s and Mari’s statements. Real sources: the NCES page on public school revenue sources, NPR’s explainer on school funding (April 18, 2016) and Chalkbeat’s report on budget cuts (May 28, 2026).

You’ll make: Fact-check, 350—450 words, with a worked calculation

Time: 75 minutes

- 1 Label each figure in Evidence A and B with its year, stage and units.
- 2 Calculate $\$48,000,000 \div 3,200$ students and label the result.
- 3 Note what the post leaves out about Westbrook’s \$21,000.
- 4 Draft the claim and the unknowns sections on the Your draft page.
- 5 Finish the fact-check, 350 to 450 words, on lined paper or in the online workspace.
- 6 Finish with one question readers can bring to the school board.



Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Labels for each figure

My calculation

Equity and adequacy, in two sentences

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

On your own Write your draft in the boxes, using your planner from the page before. About 30 minutes.

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Check your work

On your own Answer the Check your work questions, mark your level in each rubric row and write one change you made. About 8 minutes.

Is your calculation correct and labeled as proposed?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you note that the post gives no year or stage for Westbrook?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you explain what the \$310,000 line cannot show?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you end with a question for the school board?	☐ Yes	☐ No

How your work is scored

Mark one box in each row.

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Evidence	☐ Uses an unlabeled total.	☐ Uses a figure without year or stage.	☐ Labels year, stage and line and cites the need.	☐ Adds a repair quote and notes what the figures can't show.
Reasoning	☐ Assumes waste or theft.	☐ Compares mismatched numbers.	☐ Links the need to a specific budget line.	☐ Explains process questions: ranking, timing, decision-maker.
Audience & purpose	☐ Accuses the board.	☐ Complains without a request.	☐ Asks a question the board can answer.	☐ Asks a question and offers a concrete way for students to contribute.

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Revision	☐ No change.	☐ Removes insults only.	☐ Adds labels and a specific line.	☐ Explains how each change makes an answer more likely.

I changed ___ because ____.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has rounded corners and a thin black border around the edges.

Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question, then complete the sentence frames. About 10 minutes.

1 What could make spending rise without the service getting better?

2 Dec wants to ask the board himself. Why might it matter who brings the question?

3 What else would you want to know before saying one district gets less than another?

My take

My claim: ____.

The best evidence is ____, because ____.

Someone who disagrees might say ____.

The limit of the evidence is ____.

Notes

Talk about this case at home

Case 18: Why is the theater curtain still falling apart?

In this case, a group of friends reads a school district budget to find out why a torn theater curtain has not been fixed. Your student checked what the numbers mean and wrote a clear question for the school board.

Questions to talk about

- 1 Where do you think a school's money comes from?
- 2 Why can it be misleading to compare a total with an amount per person?
- 3 Who would you ask if something at school needed fixing?

Nobody needs to share personal stories or private information to talk about this case.



See the case online.