

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 6 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 6 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 page 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

\$48 million and one torn curtain

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: The curtain that won't close

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 has priced a new curtain at \$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.

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.

Mari's first question is simple: where are those numbers from? Your role is to work out the per-student number before anyone repeats the post.

 **Stop and think.** Why is comparing \$48 million with \$21,000 per student unfair?

Same scale, fair comparison

In Case 11, you learned to compare two things on the same terms. The post does not. It compares a total for a whole district with an amount per student. That is like comparing a whole pizza with one slice.

Same scale, fair comparison, continued

A **per-pupil amount** is a total divided by the number of students, so that districts of different sizes can be compared. Do the math: \$48,000,000 divided by 3,200 students is \$15,000 per student. Now the two numbers are on the same scale. Even so, the comparison is not complete. Nobody knows Westbrook's budget year or stage.

An **expenditure** is money that a government or an organization spends. **Revenue** is money that comes into a government or an organization, such as taxes and grants. The budget is marked “proposed.” In Case 4, you learned that a **proposal** is a change that someone suggests and that has not been approved yet. The figures may change before the board adopts the budget.

In Case 5, you read a pay statement line by line. A budget works the same way. Mari looks for the line that might pay for a curtain. The building repairs line is one guess. Dec starts with what he can show: the curtain, his photo and the \$6,800 quote. “I don’t know where the money went,” he says, “so I’m not guessing.”

In Case 4, you also learned that a **decision-maker** is the person or group with the power to make a particular choice. Here, the school board adopts the budget. So Dec’s question goes to the board: which line pays for stage equipment, and when does the board hear requests?

❓ **Stop and think.** What does the word “proposed” tell you about the budget?

A TV show asks the same question

In the first episode of the TV comedy Abbott Elementary (ABC, December 7, 2021), teachers need rugs and supplies. The principal gets money and spends it on a new sign instead. The money existed. The question is which line it was in, and who decided.

❓ **Stop and think.** Why does Dec start with his photo and the quote instead of guessing?

Sources

Real source | ABC | No date listed

About Abbott Elementary

Look at the evidence

On your own Read each document and write what it shows and what it leaves out. About 12 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

One question I still have

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

One question I still have

What is still missing from the evidence?

[illegible]

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 8 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 should see ____.

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 8 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

Grades 6—8

Your task

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

Make a source card for the district budget and write one question the theater crew could bring to the school board.

Use: A one-page budget excerpt with the facilities line and a photo of the curtain.

You'll make: Source card plus a 2—3 sentence question

Time: 45 minutes

- 1 Read the top of the budget in Evidence A. Write its year and stage on the source card.
- 2 Check the units. Write whether \$48 million is a total or a per-student number.
- 3 Find the line that might pay for repairs. Copy it onto the card.
- 4 Write a question of 2 or 3 sentences in the Your draft box.
- 5 Name the curtain, the \$6,800 quote and the budget line in your question.
- 6 Read your question aloud and check that it blames no one.

Show it your way

Write it: Write 2—3 sentences with the frame “The budget says __. We noticed __. Could the board explain __?”

Say it: Practice asking your board question aloud in 30 seconds, holding up the photo of the curtain.

Show it: Build the source card as sticky notes on the budget excerpt: year, stage, units and the line that might pay for the curtain.



Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Your task, continued

Year	Stage
Units	The line that might pay for the curtain

Your draft

The budget says _____. We noticed _____. Could the board explain _____?

Notes

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 5 minutes.

Does your question say the budget is proposed and for next year?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Does it name the curtain and the \$6,800 quote?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Does it name one budget line?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Does it ask without blaming anyone?	☐ 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 8 minutes.

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

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

My take

I think Dec should ask ___ because ____.

The evidence that changed my first guess is ____.

One question I still have is ____.

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.