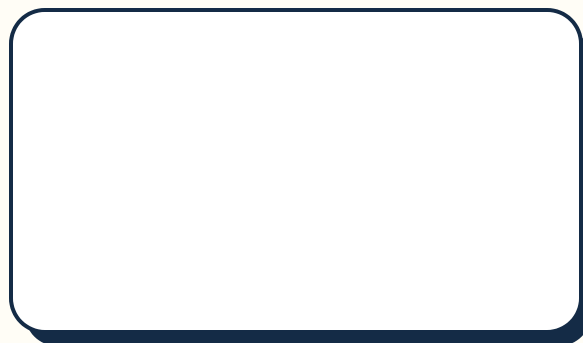


Case 18: Why is the theater curtain still falling apart?

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 5 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 5 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?

[illegible]

Reading passage

A total is not a per-student 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 curtain and a viral post

Dec pulls the stage curtain at every show. The fabric is torn, and the curtain no longer closes all the way. Dec, 17, and Anika, 16, are on the theater crew, and the facilities office has already given the theater advisor a quote to replace it: \$6,800.

Mari, 19, is helping them prepare a question for the school board. Together they find the district's proposed budget for next school year. The top line is \$48 million for a projected 3,200 students. One line reads "Facilities, building repairs (all schools): \$310,000." A note at the bottom says the figures are proposed and may change before the board adopts the budget.

Then, on Tuesday at 6:10 p.m., a post starts circulating: "Our district: \$48 MILLION. Westbrook: \$21,000 per student. And they can't fix ONE curtain?? Where is the money going?" Anika sends it to the chat. Dec admits the curtain part is true. Mari asks where the numbers come from.

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

? **Stop and think.** What three labels should you check before comparing budget numbers?

Year, stage and unit

Before comparing two budget numbers, check three labels: the year, the stage and the unit. The post skips all three. Its \$48 million is a proposed total for a whole district next year.

Year, stage and unit, continued

Its Westbrook figure is a per-student amount from an unknown year and stage.

A **per-pupil amount** is a total divided by the number of students, so that districts of different sizes can be compared. The new skill is comparing numbers on the same scale, and it builds on Case 11, where you compared two jobs on the same terms. Divide \$48,000,000 by 3,200 students, and the district's proposed amount is \$15,000 per student. The post's comparison now looks different. It is still incomplete, because Westbrook's budget year and stage are unknown. A per-pupil figure also cannot say 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. An **expenditure** is money that a government or an organization spends. The budget is a plan for expenditures, and it is a **proposal**, the Case 4 term for a change that someone suggests and that has not been approved yet. A proposed budget, an adopted budget and actual spending are three different documents.

Case 5 taught you to read a document line by line. Mari applies that to the budget. She reads the labels before reacting to the big number, and she looks for the line that could cover a curtain. Case 13 taught you to keep a claim as small as your evidence. Dec does that. His photo shows the tear, and that is all it shows. He brings the photo, the \$6,800 quote and a question.

The Case 4 **decision-maker**, the person or group with the power to make a particular choice, is the school board, which adopts the budget. Dec's question should name one line, one need and the board's next chance to hear requests. He also wants to ask it himself, because it is his crew's curtain.

 **Stop and think.** After you work out \$15,000 per student, what is still missing from the comparison?

Real budgets, real limits

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that public schools get revenue from federal, state and local sources, and the mix differs by state (NCES, May 2024). NPR has explained how local property taxes make school budgets very different from one district to the next (NPR, April 18, 2016). Many large districts are now making cuts because of inflation and enrollment declines, which shows how a large budget can leave little room for extras (Chalkbeat, May 28, 2026).

 **Stop and think.** Dec wants to ask the board himself. Why might it matter who brings the question?

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 text 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 10 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 _____. Then it can _____.

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 6 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 9—10

Your task

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

Correct a misleading social post that compares mismatched budget figures, then write a better comparison.

Use: The post, two district budget excerpts and the NCES revenue table.

You'll make: Correction post (80—120 words) plus worked calculation

Time: 50 minutes

- 1

Read the post in Evidence B. Underline the total and the per-student figure.
- 2

Calculate $\$48,000,000 \div 3,200$ students in the calculation box.
- 3

List what you still cannot compare: year, stage and categories.
- 4

Write a correction post of 80 to 120 words in the Your draft box.
- 5

Cite the proposed budget and its year in your post.
- 6

Finish with one question the numbers cannot answer.



Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Worked calculation

___ ÷ ___ = ___

The mismatch in the post

What still does not match

Your correction post, 80 to 120 words

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.

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.

Does your post name the unit mismatch?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Is your calculation correct and shown?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Do you cite the source and its year?	☐ Yes ☐ No
Do you say what the numbers still can't show?	☐ 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 is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

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 ____.

I would change my mind if ____.

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.

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.