WISCONSIN ART EDUCATION CONFERENCE

Speaking Their Language

How to Advocate for Art When the Budget Gets Tight

A practical guide for art educators and advocates

Presenter: Jennifer Handrick – handrijl@chipfalls.org

45-MINUTE CONFERENCE SESSION

Start with one uncomfortable question

If your district had to reduce its budget tomorrow,
could a board member clearly explain
why your art program should be protected?

Think of one thing your program does exceptionally well that people outside the art department may not know.

The central idea

Advocacy is helping decision-makers understand what art makes possible for students—and what is at stake when opportunities are reduced.

What board members are balancing

Students & learning

Achievement, engagement, well-being, equitable opportunity

People & operations

Staffing, class sizes, schedules, facilities, safety

Public resources

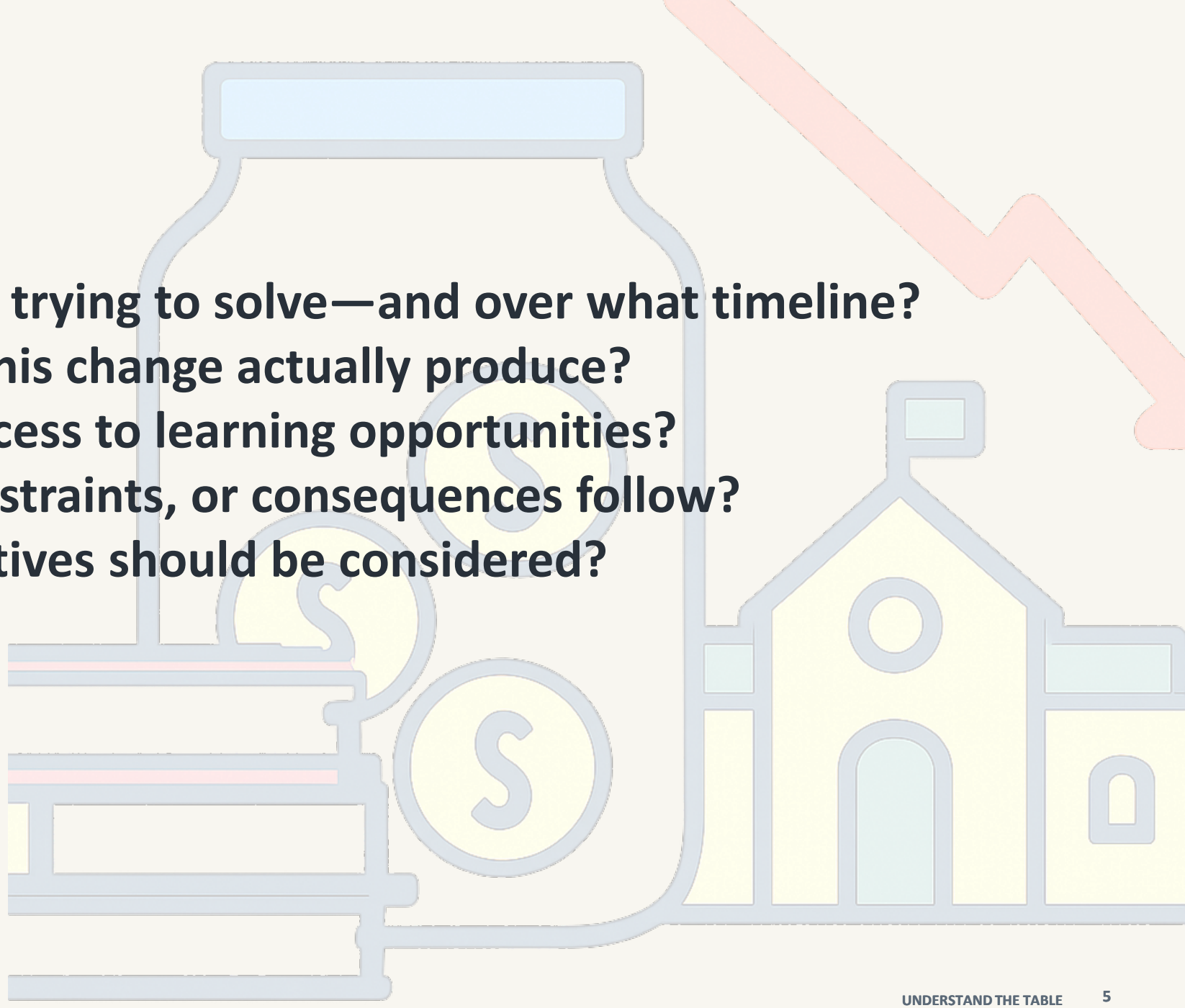
Budgets, taxpayer dollars, sustainability, trade-offs

Community trust

Transparency, family expectations, public confidence

When budgets get tight

- What problem are we trying to solve—and over what timeline?
- What savings would this change actually produce?
- Who gains or loses access to learning opportunities?
- What other costs, constraints, or consequences follow?
- What feasible alternatives should be considered?



Translate the message—not the mission

Art education language	Decision-maker language
Critique and reflection	Feedback, revision, communication
Visual literacy	Interpreting and evaluating visual information
Choice and experimentation	Student agency, engagement, problem-solving
Portfolio development	Evidence of growth and reflection
Art & design pathways	Career exploration and postsecondary preparation

Data that answers a question

Participation & access

Enrollment, percent of students served, course requests, waitlists, grade-level access

Learning & growth

Portfolios, rubrics, revision, reflection, standards-aligned evidence

Pathways

AP, dual credit, certifications, portfolios, career exploration where offered

Community value

Exhibitions, partnerships, family engagement, student contributions

A number needs context

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE—NOT DISTRICT DATA

WEAKER CASE

“Two hundred students take art.”

STRONGER CASE

“Two hundred students enrolled across four course levels this year. Course requests show additional demand for advanced design, but limited sections restrict access.”

Use local data to answer: What would students lose if the program were reduced?

Stories make the numbers matter

1 Starting point

What opportunity, challenge, or learning need did the student face?

2 Learning experience

What did the student practice, create, revise, or discover?

3 Evidence of impact

What changed, was accomplished, or became possible?

Fiscal responsibility is part of the case

- Separate essential instructional and safety needs from preferences.
- Explain consumables, reusable equipment, maintenance, and life cycles.
- Show responsible inventory, purchasing, and shared use where practical.
- Identify what can be phased—and what cannot be compromised safely.
- Connect each request to course objectives and student access.

Explain the consequences—not just the objection

Staffing / sections

Which students lose access? What happens to class size or course sequences?

Materials / equipment

Which learning objectives or safety requirements are affected?

Scheduling / rotations

Does the change block prerequisites or advanced opportunities?

Relationships before crisis

- Make student learning visible all year—not only when cuts are proposed.
- Share concise, factual program updates with administrators.
- Invite appropriate observation of student learning and exhibitions.
- Use district procedures and respect governance boundaries.
- Build partnerships with families, alumni, employers, and arts organizations.

Make the case: 30-second practice

THE SCENARIO

"We need to make difficult choices. Why should we maintain the current art program when other priorities compete for limited resources?"

BUILD YOUR RESPONSE

- Name a student need or district priority.
- Choose one strong piece of local evidence.
- Explain the specific impact of the program.
- Make a clear, responsible case—without becoming defensive.

2 min draft • 2 min partner share • 1 min debrief

A 30-day advocacy plan

- Identify three pieces of data that show program reach or impact.
- Create a one-page art program overview.
- Connect one program goal to a district priority.
- Share one student learning story or example of work.
- Start one relationship-building conversation.

The message to take with you

Bring the data.

Share the stories.

Understand the budget.

Build the relationships before you need them.

Keep bringing the conversation back to students.