

The Pennsylvania Budget Crisis and its Effect on Policy for Public Education

David P. Sosar

Assistant Professor of Political Science
King's College
133 N. River St.
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711, USA.

Abstract

Over the past three decades the amount of state funding provided to the 500 school districts across the state of Pennsylvania has decreased from a high of fifty percent of educational funding to a current thirty-five percent. Reports over the past several years such as the Costing Out Report commissioned by the State General Assembly have identified problems with state funding of education and specific short falls that should altered. The current economic conditions of the state and a projected state debt of four billion dollars do nothing but reduce the state's ability to provide adequate funding for public education in Pennsylvania. The goal of this paper is to discuss the drastic cuts to education that have been driven by a four billion dollar deficit in the state of Pennsylvania, and identify the problem and solutions that school districts have developed for better or worse.

Over the past three decades the amount of Pennsylvania state educational funding provided to the 500 school districts across the state of has decreased from a high of fifty percent to a current thirty-five percent. Reports over the past several years, such as the *Costing Out Report* commissioned by the State General Assembly have identified general and specific trends with state funding of education that should altered. The current economic conditions of the state and a projected state debt of four billion dollars do nothing but reduce the state's ability to provide adequate funding for public education in Pennsylvania(Augenblick, 2007).

The focus of this paper however, is not to argue for massive increases in public school funding. Under the present economic conditions of the United States, and Pennsylvania in particular, that type of correction cannot realistically be achieved. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the errors made by the State of Pennsylvania in its significant reduction of the education funding of the 2011-12 fiscal year, and many of the policies established by the Pennsylvania school districts across the state to compensate for reductions in local district budgets.

If the State of Pennsylvania is to attempt to realistically approximate the goals of the national policy within *No Child Left Behind*, adequate funding of school districts needs to be met. According to the *Costing Out Report*, Pennsylvania's school districts (with the exception of approximately 22 districts) are significantly underfunded. This has been true for a significant number of years since the early 1990's. Through the years however, many school districts have become more accustomed to financing their educational systems with less subsidies and increasing local tax burdens through property taxes(Augenblick, 2007).

With the 2011-12 State Budget Message, Governor Tom Corbett presented a policy decision of reducing significantly public education thereby creating a situation in which local school districts were forced to make new policy decisions. These policy decisions may not have always been in the best interest of creating an atmosphere in which educational programs and district students may have benefited(National School Boards Association, 2010).

The State Government of Pennsylvania faced a debt of \$4 Billion coming into fiscal year 2011-12. Throughout the gubernatorial campaign of 2010, candidate Tom Corbett spoke of the impending debt. He promised to make the tough decisions and cuts in the coming budget. Corbett promised a balanced budget for the state and on time. His efforts to accomplish this task were far more enabled with the election of a majority of Republicans in both the State House and State Senate.

As Corbett prepared his budget message, school districts and leading educational advocates warned of impending severe education reductions. Their fears were realized in March of 2011

On March 8, 2011 Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett proposed his 2012 the budget for the state of Pennsylvania. Within that budget of \$27.3 billion, there appeared approximately \$1.2 billion cut in public education funding. This reduction in spending included \$866 million cut in basic education funding as well as over \$300 million in funding of public institutions of higher learning in the state. This total amount of reduction demonstrated part of the promises candidate Tom Corbett had made through the campaign year of 2010 while running for the office of Pennsylvania Gov. Corbett had often times spoken about an impending four billion-dollar deficit in the Pennsylvania budget that in the coming year the new Pennsylvania Gov. and Gen. Assembly would have to address. Corbett had promised to deal with the cuts while not introducing new tax increases adding to fears of many school districts about slashes in education funding were now becoming a reality (Rourke, 2011).

Part of the reason for such large cuts in education occurred because the Commonwealth did not seek to replace state dollars with federal funds Pennsylvania had received the previous two years through the American Recovery and Rehabilitation Act (ARRA) stimulus funding from the federal government. This federal funding had been used to provide school districts with monies for basic education accountability, block grants educational assessment, tutoring, school improvement grants and reimbursements to school districts for students attending a charter schools (Rourke, 2011). A full list of the budget cuts included:

- Basic education Subsidy reduced by \$550 million
- Accountability Block Grants eliminated – a loss of \$259.456 million
- Charter school reimbursement to districts is eliminated, a loss of \$224.083 million
- Special education would be flat-funded for the 3rd consecutive year at \$1.026 Billion
- Career and Technical Education was level funded at \$62 million
- Other cuts to school districts amount to more than \$50 million

Eliminated Completely:

- Basic Education Formula Enhancements (1.984 million)
- Dual Enrollment Payments (\$6.959 million)
- School Improvement Grants (\$10.797 million)
- Education Assistance Programs (\$47.606 million)
- Science It's Elementary (\$6.910 million)
- Mobile Science Education Program (\$1.6 million)
- Intermediate Units (\$4.761 million)
- School Entity Demonstration Projects (\$600,000)
- High School Reform (\$1.762 million)
- Lifelong Learning (\$825,000)
- Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (\$69,000)
- Job Training Programs (\$3.442) (Campaign, 2011)

With no new taxing structure in place to address public education, Pennsylvania lacked sufficient funding to keep many existing programs in the public education in operation. Gov. Corbett had strongly opposed the raising of any new additional taxes at least in his first year in office. This came with strong approval for many local taxpayers and Tea Party groups within the state.

Throughout the gubernatorial election of 2010 Corbett had campaigned on specifics that he would sign a 2011-2012 budget no tax increases or new taxes; that he would deliver a budget on time unlike the past eight years of the Rendell administration, and that he would apply the brakes to school property increases within Pennsylvania by allowing voters the opportunity to vote through referendum on many school property tax increase proposal (Murphy, 2011).

Gov. Corbett and his acting budget secretary Charles Zogby believed that the proposed budget made a great effort at meetings state spending needs and eliminating part of the four billion dollar fiscal deficit of Pennsylvania.

Said acting budget secretary Charles Zogby," the spending plan meets essential needs without overburdening taxpayers (Rourke, 2011). While school districts across the state may have felt differently about these actions, they had already begun preparations on the upcoming school district budgets to meet the cuts that for many would amount to millions of dollars. State Senator Daylin Leach, D-17, of Upper Merion offered his criticism about the proposed budget cuts to education. "Leach maintained that the budget Gov. Tom Corbett initially proposed and another bill requiring a two thirds vote on school boards to raise property taxes, when taken in total present a serious threat to the concept of public education.... If they pass that bill [the budget] you're looking at dismantling programs not only here but across the region" (Puglionesi, 2011). Leach also noted that with over \$1 billion from education funding in Gov. Corbett's initial budget for school districts could lose 40 to 45% of their state subsidies, potentially sending them into a 'death spiral'" (Puglionesi, 2011). Many other lawmakers criticized the timing of these educational cuts due to the poor economic conditions within Pennsylvania as well as its already statewide underfunding (down to approximately 35% of all public school funding).

Some legislators after the budget was passed continued their criticism of the governor's budget as an attempt to offer vouchers and other incentives to students to attend private and parochial schools. Eddy Day Pashinski a State Representative from the 117th District in the Northeast Region of Pennsylvania suggested that "[he the governor] made drastic cuts to public education at least partly to persuade wealthier families to place their children in private, for-profit schools" (Mocarsky, 2011). He went on to say it's pretty obvious that the governor has his sights set on vouchers and he is interested in gleaning all public school students into private ventures into charter schools into cyber schools. And that my dear friends is a major mistake. That is being done primarily for a profit driven industry (Mocarsky, 2011).

Along with state legislators, school board members and their chief financial officers raise the volley of criticism against such budget cuts. Many members of school boards throughout the state expressed a fear of cutting programs draining reserve funds raising property taxes, and overall questioning the effectiveness or quality of the education students would be receiving would fall to a new level (yournorthhills, 2011).

Studies performed by numerous school districts attempted to highlight the type of sacrifices Pennsylvania school districts would have to meet in order to deal with the cuts in subsidies from the Pennsylvania budget. Some examples prepared by the Council for the advancement of public schools in the southeastern portion of Pennsylvania (educational specialists for Montgomery and Bucks County) include:

curtailment of programs such as music... elimination of spending for special education placements outside of the district... cuts and paraprofessionals for special needs students some students who receive special services will be returning to their districts resulting in furloughs of teachers... the cutting of for teachers from a title I program designed to meet the educational needs of low achieving students... possible loss of a planetarium program... reduction in the number of bus runs from 4 to 3 for low of classroom teachers; and, significant increases in class size (Friends of Education, 2010).

As figures became clearer as to the amount of money (approximately \$1 billion) in budget cuts, the Council for advancement of public schools researches the effect of such cuts across the 500 school districts of Pennsylvania. They found that district budget cuts would range from \$168,000 on the lowest side of cuts to \$295 million on the upper end (obviously including the Philadelphia school system). Some of the major programs at risk the reduction in land of kindergarten programs within the state, a possible loss in achievement scores in reading international assessment of educational progress tests decrease in math scores in the same test, and a possible reduction in the number of PA students attending colleges and universities because of lack of funding. Without the necessary number of teachers and staff aides to assist students it was felt the progress Pennsylvania students have made through the last few years would be placed in jeopardy (Friends of Education, 2010).

Before discussing the policy of the state government leading to these major cuts in education funding and the policies enacted by local school districts to deal with this action, it should be noted that initial protests by lawmakers and citizenry called for new and more creative taxation by the governor and the state Gen. assembly. Opinion polls produced by the Democratic Party Pennsylvania showed majority of Pennsylvanians oppose to such drastic cuts in funding. Many states citizens as well as lawmakers suggested the creation of new taxation regarding the MarcellusShale natural gas drilling in the northern tier of Pennsylvania.

In addition, money from the state rainy day fund of approximately \$600 million was suggested for use as well as possible revenue from the sale of the Pennsylvania State liquor stores in the event Gov. Corbett were to carry out one of his other campaign promises (Pennsylvania Democratic Party, 2011).

A search of polls conducted through the state of Pennsylvania including the Tribune Review, the Patriot News, the Times Tribune, and the Philadelphia Daily News present polls in which a majority of Pennsylvanians oppose the governor's educational cuts. Patriot News reported that a Franklin & Marshall poll showed 78% of Pennsylvanians opposed to cutting local school district funding. Other polls suggested that taxing the s Marcellus Shale natural gas industry would be a means of raising sufficient funds to replace the money needed for funding public education appropriately. It should be noted however that an additional Franklin & Marshall polls, a majority of Pennsylvanians appeared confident that Gov. Corbett could effectively handle the state's entire budget problems (Pennsylvania Democratic Party, 2011).

While public opinion was opposed to such drastic state education cuts and many state legislators continued to criticize the governor's budget, there were supporters for such cuts. Gov. Corbett was facing the same type of budgetary problems that many other state governors were facing across the country. Proposals for reduced educational funding were heard across the United States, from California to Wisconsin and into New Jersey. In Gov. Corbett's budget message to the general assembly, he renewed his campaign rhetoric stating that it was now time to take the difficult medicine and act in a responsible manner. That meant cuts nearly across the board in state budget matters (United Business Media, 2011).

In like manner Secretary of Education, Arnie Duncan, in his comments recognized problems of education funding that states were facing. He recognized the need to do more with less funding and offered his proposals for accomplishing this important task. Duncan and other educational leaders strongly encouraged well-thought-out plans to deal with less funding in local school districts but maintaining or in fact improving educational programs. Duncan's emphasis was on the productivity of educational programs and not the desire to continue to just throw money at public school systems. Reduced spending was the "new normal" stated Duncan "it is a reality that everyone seeking to improve education must grapple with" in fiscally difficult times (Duncan, 2011). "Yet, there are productive and unproductive ways to meet this challenge of doing more with less.... Don't cut back in a manner that damages school quality and hurts children.... I'm talking about steps like reducing the number of days in the school year, slashing instructional time spent on task, eliminating the arts in foreign languages, abandoning promising reforms, and laying off talented young teachers (Duncan, 2011)."

With the possible exception of reducing the educational year by a number of days, all the above have been the type of cuts school districts have normally felt necessary to make when budget cuts have become inevitable. Whenever school districts have been faced with fiscal shortfalls, the all too often answer has been to cut wake-up educational programs is again our programs and the laying off of untenured or less senior teaching personnel. These actions have a tendency to educational injure students who most often need extra assistance. A brief overview of some of the prepared actions by school districts preparing for the 2011 educational budget cuts demonstrates most effectively the policy decisions that school boards tend to make when budget cuts occur.

According to the Council for advancement of public schools some of the following school districts will enact budget cuts in the following manner:

Hatboro-Horsham school district, projected to lose \$781,297 will continue to reduce further its music programs and furlough as many as 22 teachers thus increasing the size of classes that remain... The lower Merion School District projected to lose \$564,377 planned to eliminate spending for special education placement outside of the district and also plan to cut paraprofessionals for special needs students... The Methacton School District plans cutting four teachers from the title I program which was established to meet the educational needs of low achieving students; reduced by four math specialists; increase class size especially in the seventh and eighth grades; eliminate family consumer science programs and six great and reduced the number of bus runs from 4 to 3 (Schools, 2011).

The Council for the Advancement of Public Schools further concluded that such drastic cuts in education would lead to the reduction of districts which could afford full-day kindergarten programs as well as other early childhood programs.

Lost money would mean reductions in this course students achieved in the PSSA Test in general, and in particular the students who needed extra tutoring such as those in English as a second language, low income students and those with special needs according to their summary the greatest damage would occur in math scores and possibly in some language arts scores (Schools C. f., 2011). In other areas of the state similar actions by school districts were discussed and enacted as well in an interview with the superintendent of the Pittsburgh School System, Dr. Linda Ln., Dr. Lane stated that the district under the current cuts would lose 59 district employees including 31 teachers through a mix of furloughs and layoffs as well as the possibility of approximately another 40 additional staff members. These cuts came on top of an already reduced teaching staff by 217 positions already eliminated at the end of the 2011 school year. Dr. Carr also spoke of reductions in early childhood programs in the increase in class size due to fewer teachers (Heller, 2011).

Across the state of Pennsylvania, the state educational cuts translated into approximately 14,000 school jobs lost in the 500 school districts. Half of the lost school employees would be due directly to the budget cuts while the other half were jobs of attrition that could not be refilled due to the fiscal problems. The results all over remain the same students across Pennsylvania will sit in larger classes, will have the opportunity of fewer electives, as well as fewer up to date materials and technology. In general it would appear that the educational opportunities for students will not meet the standards Pennsylvania has set as a good quality education (Esack, 2011).

The furloughing or elimination of over 14,000 education jobs within Pennsylvania has a number of serious consequences that should be investigated first elimination of such a number will necessitate increasing class size in many school districts. Increasing class size by itself is not educationally detrimental to the student but it has been found that increasing class size of students in the earliest grades K through three does have a detrimental effect on the educational performance of students. The one-on-one time when the additional help that a teacher can provide in helping to establish the basic foundations of education are most of her according to educational research within these early grades arbitrarily selecting teachers not to be replaced by school districts should not be a way to handle furloughs because of budget cuts (Chingos, 2011)

Second, reduction of school staff may eliminate opportunities of assistance that teachers provides students not only in but outside the classroom whether through coaching more clubs or simply being there to talk teachers and support personnel have played over the years and never more increasing import role in assisting students in public education are. Without the staff schools may be forced to close academic programs clubs tutoring programs simply because of a lack of personnel available with which to handle the students.

Third, furlough teachers and school personnel will no longer be able to help in support of local communities tax base as easily with less funds less income their buying power their home maintenance their ability to financially assist in local budgets becomes increasingly more acute (Quality, 2011).

Fourth and finally, an indirect result of lost jobs, the fear of worsening economic conditions, rising prices, possibly increased taxation and healthcare, may make senior teachers and paraprofessionals less likely to retire in the near future, thus reducing the teaching opportunities are for best and brightest young teachers who may wish to enter the profession here in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania has been a state which has seen its share of brain drain during the past few decades. This trend may continue in the future (Quality, 2011).

The policy of reducing further the percentage of educational funding the Pennsylvania Governor and the General Assembly may reduce the size of the state budget, but at what cost to the students of Pennsylvania? Pennsylvania according to its own costing out report of 2007 prepared by Augenblick and others is already approximately \$4 billion behind in actual and proper funding of state public education when compared to that of other states in taxing structure and per-student funding (Nicholas Johnson, 2009). Reducing the funding throughout the state, now down to approximately 35% of the overall educational spending, places Pennsylvania in an unenviable position of states with the largest educational cut and the lowest per student funding (Nicholas Johnson P. O., 2011)

Because of no Child left behind the decrease in state funding of public education and programs necessary to him prove average yearly progress scores make the state of Pennsylvania susceptible to reduced federal funding due to scores of specific cohorts that may drag down the scores of schools and school districts across the state. A time when Pennsylvania school districts were beginning to see improvements in AYP reduction in spending can do little but harm the progress made in public schools to this point in time. (Nicholas Johnson P. O., 2011)

It has been suggested that Gov. Tom Corbett has used a reduction in education funding to promote a voucher program which he had suggested during the campaign. Interestingly Governor Corbett has continued to propose a school voucher during the legislative year of 2011. Through tax credits given to Pennsylvania businesses who offer charitable grants and vouchers to students wishing to attend private school, Gov. Corbett has sought to improve education by making it more competitive and thereby better for all students across the state (Murphy J. , 2011).

While the intention of such a voucher program has its merit to improve education and offer students new and challenging opportunities such a voucher program still leaves a lot of issues unsolved regarding the lowest percentages of students who cannot afford private and parochial education even with a voucher that would eliminate some of the cost. When vouchers have been suggested and nearly passed in the state of Pennsylvania in past times, too often the private and parochial schools involved in receiving new students have increased their tuition rates in relation to the voucher amounts. In addition, school voucher plans will not assist those students left in failing schools which will have less money to accommodate those students in need of a quality education (Leach, 2011)

With the problematic economic conditions faced but only in Pennsylvania the cross United States, local school districts have witnessed reductions budget revenue. Districts have witnessed decreases in earned income tax collections due to lost jobs; and, reduction in property tax money collected due to foreclosures and reduction in the value of property assessment (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2010) (Savrock, 2011).

Governor Corbett's 2011-2012 budget also called for voter referendum on any school district property tax increase that exceeded the rate of inflation. In doing so, the governor tied the hands of most school districts requiring money needed actually pay for the budgetary gap created by the state's budget reductions. In most cases across to stay referendums held in the spring primary elections disallowed most increases in taxation of locals goal property taxes to replace budgetary shortfalls. Therefore even if the school boards wished not to cut educational programs or reduce teaching staffs, they became ineffective in filling the budgetary gaps that were created (Post-Gazette, 2011).

While state budget policy may have created severe problems for local school districts in funding the educational programs and staffing, local districts have not fared better in some of the policy decision they have selected to bridge the funding gap. It should be noted that these policy decision by themselves are not wrong, however, if not thought through carefully and with the best interest of the students in mind, such policies may have a detrimental effect on providing a sound education. Some of the policies below may also be considered to be unhealthy or economically discriminatory as well regardless of the need to meet financial obligations.

Many school districts have immediately moved to reduce the number of teachers within the school district as a means of saving significant amounts of money in the upcoming budgetary year. The reduction of staff at times can and is a useful way of being able to save money and reduce budgetary stress. When done with a great deal of foresight increasing in class size by its own nature does not necessarily cause a disadvantage to students. Increase class size according the most studies when it occurs at middle school grades on through high school has little impact on the quality of education students will receive (Chingos, 2011)

While every school district would like to see all student have as much attention paid to him or her in the classroom as possible, at the higher grade levels an increase in class size traditionally has not created a negative impact on the education received. However, in grades K through three educational studies have proved significant that an increase in class size beyond the except the bull range (i.e. 15 to 20 students) a negative impact occurs in the education a student will receives. Is paramount her that when considering a reduction in staff, that early education staff (K – 3) is not affected by such staff reductions during her. Studies directed at grades four through six have not been as conclusive in their findings related to class size (Chingos, 2011) In addition, it is important to keep in mind that mere seniority may not be the best policy to utilize in reducing staff. While unions will argue strongly in opposition to anything but the seniority process, keeping some of our youngest and brightest teachers who can work with students in newly trained and creative ways should also be taken into consideration (Duncan, 2011).

This last point will not be an easy policy to enact. School Districts will need to deal with teacher unions as well as teaching staff to establish new furloughing strategies, early retirement programs, and other such devices to retain those teachers whose techniques, and technological skills can help students learn in more effective and efficient manners. This will require lengthy discussions and compromise on both sides of the issue for districts to continue to do more with less.

Quite often reduction in state funding requires the elimination of school programs such as tutoring, after school activities, as well as arts and music programs. Concerning after school and tutoring programs, reduction of these elements within the school day help reduce the font and interest many students may have in pursuing an education. The lack of afterschool activities and tutoring programs that help stimulate the mind help improve students' knowledge in subject areas and/or make learning fun for the student, reduce the chances of the student is performing well on his or her PSSA's and other standardized tests that each student may be required to take(Noguera, 2010).

If the goals of our educational system are to improve a students' quality of life and opportunities to pursue gainful employment in an ever more competitive world, the need to provide those opportunities in school to acquire that knowledge skills necessary for the working world must be offered in a more challenging and creative manner. Many students come with language barriers, social and economic barriers, and educational issues which must be addressed in our educational system. When one looks more closely at state standardized test scores within school districts across the state of Pennsylvania, entire schools nor school districts are failing in the category of average year progress of *No Child Left Behind*. One finds that most often low income, English Language Learners (ELL), and special education cohorts are causes for AYP not being met. And yet, these are precisely the groups that need the additional tutoring after school programs and assistance to achieve academic excellence(Cortiella, 2011)(Barbara Schneider, 2006)(Sang Hoon Bae, 2007).

School districts have attempted to try to make up moneys lost in budgets by creating a pay to play policy. Many school districts require athletes and their booster clubs to help finance the athletic programs of school districts. While the amounts of money to date have remained relatively small(\$25-\$50 per athlete), the mere fact of money being undecided factor in sports may negate some students the opportunity to participate in activities that make their educational career or special more enhanced more fun. If they play programs continue it may certainly create a situation where more students will be locked out of participating merely for financial reasons(Rausch, 2006) A new and novel way of attempting to make up for budgetary shortfalls is beginning to occur in the Northern Tier regions of Pennsylvania. This area of the state has become well-known for its Marcellus Shale natural gas. School district in the northern tier who have seen their budgets cut by hundreds of thousands of dollars have decided to rent acreage to the natural gas acreage to drilling companies for what has become hundreds of thousands of dollars thus filling the gap created by the state(Wieder, 2011) .

School districts are renting land for drilling, for pipeline stations, and numerous other activities created by the new Marcellus Shale natural gas drilling in the district. Because of the fear that some residents have concerning contamination of underground water sources fracking materials which expose individuals to potential carcinogens, potential explosions, and contaminated water being released, many fear this exposure to students the harm that may occur over years of exposure and then potential threat to current health have left many residents wondering if this actions is worth the money. If however school districts see this as a new funding source and see the risks involved as minimal as some school directors have (i.e. renting their own lands to drilling companies for nearly \$6000 an acre per year) then school (Hiteshite, 2011)

It should be noted that none of these policies by their own nature are evil or an educationally detrimental to students. Many of these policies however have a great potential for damaging students educational endeavors and the quality of education they may receive. Increase in money does not always mean increases in educational production or the quality of education. Many fine teachers have taught oversize classes. Not all programs are sacred cows that must be preserved at any cost. School districts must learn to live within their means as do other public entities. When additional money is needed, they can become creative with their efforts and with volunteerism through family assistance. Many articles have included the precise reductions that have been mentioned in this paper as reductions in spending, but have also noted that these actions should be used as a last resort or carefully managed in order to not damage educational progress(Patrick L. Anderson, 1997)(Kladaroo, 2009).

Money from new sources such as the Marcellus Shale natural gas industry may be worth-while endeavors. Pursuing revenues from Casinos in local regions has been suggested by leading educators. With less money and the potential for further cuts by the State of Pennsylvania in coming years, School Districts will need to become even more creative in their financing of educational programs. If the above new sources or cuts in programs do not impact negatively on the well-being of students within the school district then the policy may be worth pursuing. When school districts unfortunately are faced with hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars in budgetary cuts from their state and federal government it places school directors in an unenviable position of needing to address these issues. Not all districts necessarily have the foresight, the proper advice of expert to come up with the best policy decisions that will be educationally beneficial to its students. This paper is more concerned with the necessity of creating clear and well-thought out policy decisions than suggesting what specific policy to enact. Many groups are demanding that all forms of government including local school districts live within their means. This can be accomplished to a degree, but reach this goal individuals must keep their eyes open and use all their intelligence, fiscal and educational responsibility, as well as creativity.

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