Boston public school students overtook the district’s budget forum Tuesday with tough questions for the superintendent

At one point, they kicked all of the adults out of the room.

Students who attended the budget forum Tuesday first participated in an improv activity. –Allison Pohle/Boston.com

By Allison Pohle June 7, 2016

At the beginning of a forum to discuss the Boston Public Schools budget Tuesday night, Superintendent Tommy Chang introduced a warm up activity for the few dozen students in attendance.

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“Have any of you ever done improv?” he asked. “I’m going to give you a question
and you have to answer the question starting with, ‘No, but.’ For instance, ‘What would be in your dream school cafeteria?’ And someone will answer, then the next person will say, ‘No, but.’"

He then had them repeat the activity, but answer each question with, “Yes, and” — an exercise intended to foster a collaborative environment. But, when he asked for feedback about the exercise, Fania Joseph, a sophomore at Boston Community Leadership Academy, changed the subject.

“I think the atmosphere is kind of tense in here so we should do an ice-breaker,” she said. “I have one in mind. It’s a stand-up, sit-down game.”

“Stand up if you felt patronized by this activity,” Joseph said.

Every student stood up. Multiple students expressed how they didn’t come to play games. They came to talk about the budget.

Chang apologized and explained that the “yes, and” activity is something everyone on his senior leadership team does, but he also said he was open to suggestions from the students as to how the meeting should progress.

“Thank you for being positive and holding me accountable,” he said. “What the purpose of today is, is to talk about the budget.”

When Chang and senior leaders of the district’s finance department planned the forum, they hoped students would run through an activity that would simulate the decisions school officials make during the budgeting process, including ideas for investments and reductions. But most of the students in attendance didn’t want to run through hypothetical numbers. They wanted to talk about the current budget situation.

“This is too organized,” said Brian Foster, a senior at Excel High School. “It feels like school.”

What the students ultimately decided to do was ask the adults to leave for a few minutes. Once the room was cleared, they stood in a circle and made a game plan. After about 10 minutes, they asked the adults to come back in and sit in a circle. Chang, as well as school finance department members Eleanor Laurans and David Bloom, sat cross-legged on the hardwood floor as the students
asked questions for the next 30 minutes.

“Is your job just to allocate the money the city gives to the schools or decide what departments it goes into?” one student asked.

“The school department is one of the departments in the city, and we’re allocated a dollar amount,” Chang said. “Based on the allocation the city provides, we then push those dollars through a budgeting process to schools.”

He then explained that schools create their budgets based off the weighted student funding formula. After these budgets are created, the school committee votes on the allocations, and then the vote is passed to the City Council.

“That’s where we’re at right now,” Chang said.

One student stood up and reiterated that Chang and the finance administrators were given a set amount by the city, and had to make do with what they had.

“We need to all actually go to the City Council in order to get the money back,” the student said. “These people here are not the enemy. And sure we might not agree with them on a lot, but we should be talking about where the money we’re given should be going.”

After spending the better part of the year organizing walk outs and giving testimony at budget hearings, this answer made Foster feel defeated.

“This seems like a last resort,” he said as he walked into the middle of the circle. “These scenarios put us in the scenario of we already lost. We should just leave at this point.”

Ashon Bigby, a sophomore at Urban Science Academy, stood up and walked over to Foster.

“What we’re here for is to explain to these guys what are problems are in the school,” Bigby said. “They understand that. They do. Everyone’s gonna try their best. [Chang’s] really 100 percent about Boston Public Schools.”

Earlier in the meeting, members of the finance team said the conversation helped them determine how to better input student priorities into the budgeting process.
“From my perspective, I don’t have a lot of opportunity to interact with student voices,” Bloom said. “So this is helpful for me in the future as I’m thinking for planning next year’s situation because this year’s budget is sort of out of my control at this point.”

Chang also said he’d like to have students become more involved in the budgeting process sooner, as the City Council is set to hold its first vote on the budget Wednesday.

“One of the big asks I had of everyone was, ‘Could we have ways to have young people more involved in the budgeting process in the very beginning?’” he said. “But I’m glad this happened. It was so much more authentic, so much more genuine. I learned a lot just letting you guys take the reigns.”

He repeated multiple times during the course of the meeting that the well-being of all Boston Public School students was his main priority, which is why he would continue to advocate to their interests.

“I talk about the importance of spending money on young people every day,” Chang said while addressing the students earlier in the meeting. “That’s why I go to the City Council.”

“Do they listen to you,” Joseph asked.

Chang laughed.

“I hope they do.”

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