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Scenario planning: These strategies improves district resilience

By Dr. Dana Codek and Michael Moore October 20, 2025



This is the season that invites reflection: before budgets lock, before hiring ramps up, while there's still time to adjust. It's the moment to step back, read your district's shifting conditions, and spot openings for better resource use and stronger performance.

Scenario planning helps you do that. It's a way to avoid being blindsided by the next funding cut or enrollment drop.

Instead of reacting, you've already rehearsed your response. Instead of scrambling, you pivot. Scenario planning is strategic insurance built during calm weather, not a storm.

Most districts do some scenario planning, but they tend to focus on picking solutions for school closures, boundary changes or layoffs, instead of looking at all the environmental factors. The opportunity now is to make it part of your annual rhythm, so your system stays in readiness, not recovery, mode.

By starting early, you expand your influence, keep stakeholders informed about shifting conditions and test possible responses before decisions harden.

Too often, "zero-based budgeting" becomes a slogan rather than a process. Because roughly 80% of spending goes to labor, most districts simply recycle last year's program and staffing models.



Taking a wider view of revenue streams, policy levers and creative resource allocation often reveals room for a more focused, more resilient system.

Scenario planning in practice: You already do it

You already know the moves. Districts and universities use scenario planning every day to prepare for uncertainty:

- **K-12 Funding Shifts.** The California Association of School Business Officials shows how one district modeled three federal funding scenarios—steady, cut, and locally offset—and mapped their impact on staff and programs. (casbo.org)
- **Emergency Preparedness.** The REMS TA Center helps districts imagine natural disasters before they strike, defining goals and pre-set actions. (rems.ed.gov)
- **Higher Ed During COVID.** Universities tested remote, hybrid, and in-person futures to stress-test enrollment, budgets, and operations. (insidehighered.com)

Broaden the lens: Use a PESTLE analysis

To move beyond single-issue planning, widen your scan with PESTLE: the political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental forces shaping your district's future.

1. **Political:** Federal and state policies, board elections, legislation on parental rights, school choice or special education.
2. **Economic:** Funding volatility, tax base shifts, workforce costs or the claw back of federal funding.
3. **Social:** Changing birth rates, housing trends and attitudes toward public vs. private schooling.
4. **Technological:** New learning tools, cybersecurity threats, AI and digital equity.
5. **Legal:** Rulings on labor, civil rights, DEI or data use that redefine compliance and risk.
6. **Environmental:** Climate events, energy costs and sustainability mandates that reshape facilities and budgets.

PESTLE scanning connects data you already collect, often in silos, into a wider picture. It exposes both predictable trends and wildcards, from demographic change to cyberattacks. It replaces tunnel vision with a panoramic view.

Examples from the field

Facing a projected \$734 million deficit for FY 2026, Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Public Education Fund laid out four distinct budget-balancing scenarios: (1) deep cuts, (2) borrowing, (3) new revenue from city/state, and (4) renegotiating the MEABF pension transfer assumption.

Each scenario includes trade-offs (e.g., school cuts, debt risk, political constraints) and is evaluated against feasibility, timing and impact on students. By exploring alternatives side by side rather than assuming one "baseline" pathway, CPS is engaging in scenario planning: testing multiple plausible futures, comparing responses, and enabling leaders to choose a path informed by risk, values and flexibility rather than default assumptions.

Orcutt USD conducted a demographic projection exercise to anticipate growth of 242 students by 2030–31, then considered multiple strategies (e.g., adjusting attendance



boundaries, relocating programs, expanding facilities) to manage that growth.

Leaders solicited board input on planning objectives (efficiency, neighborhood continuity, program capacity, minimal disruption) and presented multiple boundary-shift options before a decision. The district didn't assume one static future, they mapped enrollment shifts, stress-tested their facility and boundary options in multiple "what-if" configurations, and pre-planned responses before pressures forced reaction.

"At Orcutt USD, we knew that responsible growth management meant more than reacting to enrollment changes, it required anticipating them. By projecting our demographic trends and modeling multiple 'what-if' scenarios, we were able to test our facilities, boundary configurations, and program capacities before the pressure points emerged. This proactive approach ensured that our decisions aligned with community values, while maintaining flexibility for the future." – Dr. Holly Edds, Superintendent

Sylvan USD laid out multi-year budget projections for 2024-25 through 2025-26 under different assumptions (e.g., changes in COLA, expiration of one-time funds, staffing costs) and identified necessary reductions (up to \$1.3 million) to maintain solvency.

There wasn't a single "baseline" future; the district built a flexible roadmap under varying funding, staffing and policy scenarios, stress-testing their assumptions and preparing responses before conditions force reactive cuts.

Scenario planning as a strategic upgrade

Most districts have strategic plans that assume a stable world. Scenario planning assumes the opposite, and that's its power.

Your strategic plan defines where you want to go. Scenario thinking helps you stay on course when the terrain changes. It stress-tests your goals against new mandates, funding drops or enrollment dips, revealing which actions hold up across all futures.

Scenario planning doesn't replace your plan; it upgrades it. It shifts your stance from control to readiness, from certainty to adaptability.

Getting started

Anchor this work in your annual calendar before budgeting and hiring decisions freeze flexibility:

1. Frame one big "what if." (e.g., "What if enrollment drops 10% over three years?")
2. Assemble a small cross-functional team. (6–10 people across finance, HR, instruction, operations.)
3. Scan the six PESTLE domains. Gather what you know; note what's missing.
4. Sketch three plausible futures. Use a 90-minute session to test assumptions.
5. Spot 'no-regrets' actions. What decisions make sense in any scenario?
6. Check quarterly. Watch early indicators and pivot on pre-agreed triggers.

Using scenarios to guide decisions



- Short-Term: Stress-test choices before finalizing them. Ask, “Will this hold if funding drops or policy shifts?” Many pandemic hires assumed temporary funds would last; scenario thinking keeps expectations real.
- Long-Term: Treat scenarios as a strategic dashboard. Monitor early signals such as enrollment, legislation, and costs, and adjust deliberately, not reactively.

Keeping scenario thinking alive

Boards live in short cycles and visible results. Scenario planning’s longer view can seem abstract unless it’s tied to today’s choices.

Frame it as insurance, not speculation. Show how preparing for multiple futures protects public dollars and reduces backtracking.

Use simple metaphors to make it stick:

- “Scenario planning is weather forecasting for strategy, you decide what to wear before you leave.”
- “It’s how we stress-test our plan before the world does.”
- “Our strategic plan sets the destination; scenario planning keeps us on the road when the route changes.”

These images help staff and communities see that planning for uncertainty builds confidence, not confusion.

Step back to see further

Pick one high-stakes area and spend 90 minutes exploring three possible futures about that specific challenge. Ask aloud: “What future are we preparing for, and is that still the one we want?”

Carry that insight into hiring, budgeting and board conversations. The groundwork you lay now will pay dividends when surprises arrive—and they will.

Scenario planning won’t predict the future, but it ensures you won’t be surprised.

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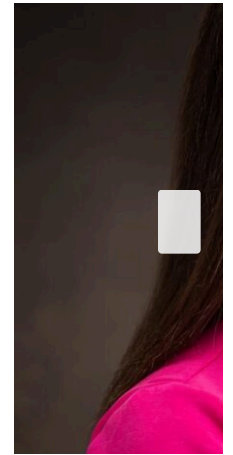
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